

OCTOBER 1998



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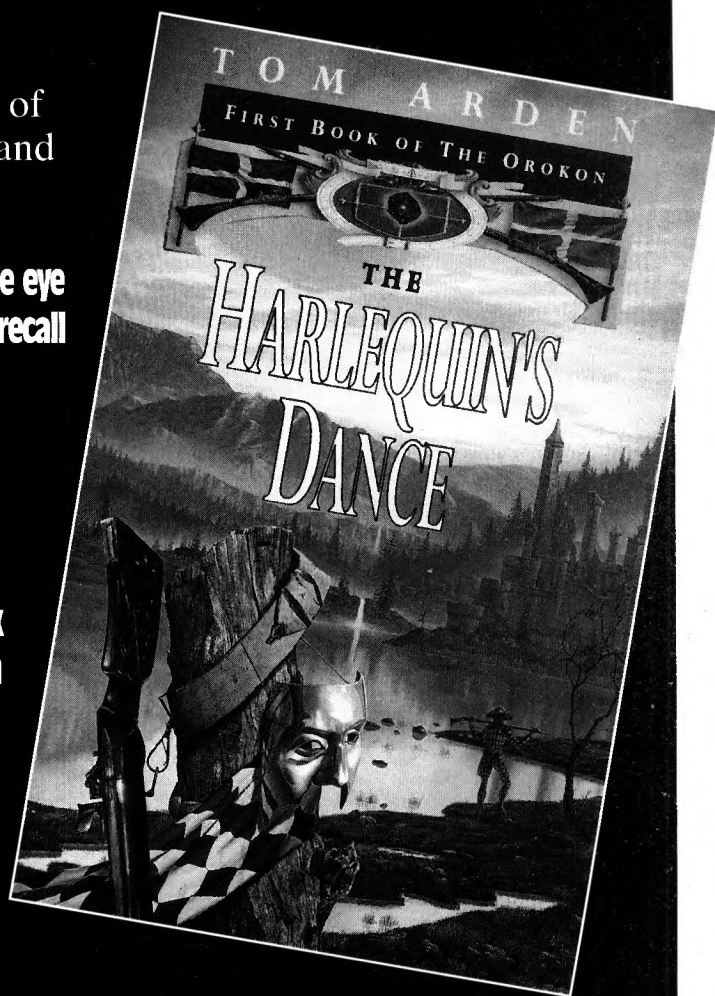
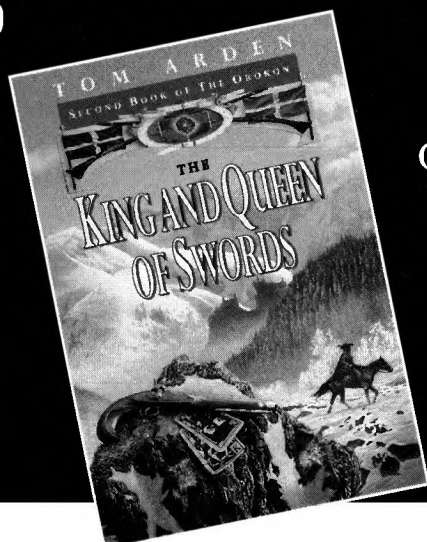
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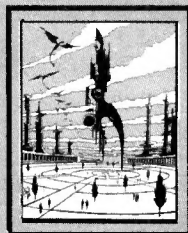
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# InterZone

October 1998

136

science fiction & fantasy

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Cover by Roy Virgo

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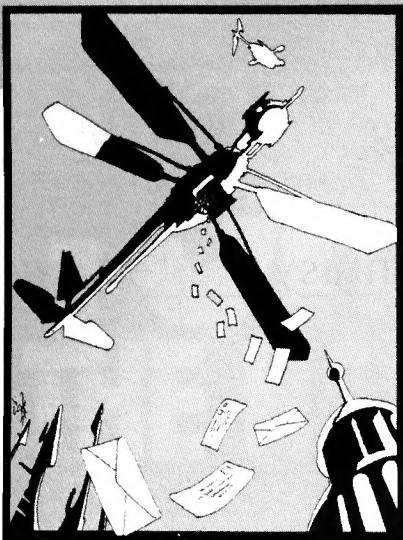
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## + + Interaction + +

Dear Editors:

Even though I am several issues behind on my *Interzone* reading, I will not let the ravings of Gary Westfahl ("Greyer Lensmen," *IZ* 129) pass unnoticed.

Some of the story I know all too well. "Where is the youth, the wildness?" wrote a young fan in response to a query about a recent Scandinavian science-fiction festival, and went on to complain about the dominance of "elderly sf nerds." I also remember showing my friends pictures from the event. "Are *all* Danish science-fiction fans middle-aged hippies?" said one guy, showing some contempt at the photos.

"Well, I guess you know the answer to that one," I said, slightly offended, pointing to my semi-young, semi-well-dressed self. Still, Gary Westfahl might be right about the "greying of fandom" – at least, if you exclude media fandom. I should know: I found the first grey hair at my temple some time ago. And I'm barely 30!

That much I'll grant your *enfant terrible* columnist. What really puzzles me about Westfahl's piece is the claim that the recent popularity of alternative-history fiction has anything to do with this.

Darrell Schweitzer, who claims to dislike alternative history, cheers Westfahl heartily in *IZ* 131. We seem to have an interesting mutual understanding here. Alternative history has always been one of my favourite kinds of science fiction but I agree to much of what Schweitzer has to say. Indeed, Schweitzer cites the very works by Roberts, Dick, Moore and Amis that I would always include in a defence of the AH genre – books that "have some validity as art, as literature (...), even as science fiction." Well, Sturgeon's Law has always struck me as a facile defence of anything, but still the fact that there is so much bad AH fiction

available nowadays should not drive us to the conclusion that AH is bad *per se*. I care about AH, so I care about the question *why* so much of the very popular recent AH is of so little interest.

Westfahl's line is that AH is obsessed with the past, not the future. (As he pours his derision over the sub-genre, he manages to accuse it of being both "puerile" and "an old man's literature" – ah, the logic of ire!) Now, it so happens that to acquire a sense of historicity, one has to become aware both that we come from somewhere (the past) and that we're going somewhere (the future). Nostalgia and futurism are both pitfalls that prevent you from seeing the big picture. And the trouble with much modern alternative history is not that it's about the past, but rather that it's ahistorical and consequently about nothing. In his excellent essay "Alternate History and Postmodern Temporality" (in *Time, Literature, and the Arts*, 1994), Paul J. Alkon has convincingly demonstrated the shift from the true AH of classics like *Pavane* and *The Man in the High Castle* to the anachronistic fantasy of e.g. Turtle-dove's *Guns of the South* and Sterling & Gibson's *The Difference Engine* (and they are even reasonably competent cases). Alkon sees this shift as in accordance with the trend of postmodernism. Postmodernism for old men – the mind boggles!

Young people today "usually know little and care nothing about yesterday's history," says Westfahl, and presents that as an explanation why AH should appeal to older readers, while in fact he has given the very reason why younger reader should be able to tolerate anachronistic fiction of the "what if Robin Hood had had a machine gun" variety. Westfahl's contention is not just that sf should be about the future (a debatable claim in itself), but that young people prefer stories about space exploration. But this theme is no longer the "monomyth" of science fiction, and visions of Artificial Intelligence may be much closer to the heart of many a youthful sf reader.

Westfahl, in contrast, is afraid of intelligent machines taking over, and takes dreams of galactic conquest to be at the core of the genre. Now, come on – who's the old fogey here?

**Stig W. Jorgensen**  
Copenhagen, Denmark

Dear Editors:

Just a quick note to let you know that I agree wholeheartedly with Gary Westfahl's view of alternative-history stories ("Greyer Lensmen," March 1998), and particularly his

comment about Kim Newman. I share his irritation and sorrow that such a good writer should spend so much time and effort on a genre that is often "puerile and pointless."

I suspect I know why, though. There is a great attraction to those in the know, to make and appreciate a plethora of in-jokes. This is all well and good when one knows the territory (I admit to thoroughly enjoying the Vietnam storyline of "Teddy Bears' Picnic," because it tapped into so many strands of my adolescent TV-watching), and if one is looking for laughs rather than depth. Not so, emphatically, if 'tis otherwise – as it is for most of us, most of the time.

And, of course, there is always the exception that proves the rule. Keith Roberts's *Pavane* remains one of my favourite books, despite periodic re-reading, and easily makes it to my sf top ten. Perhaps the difference is that Roberts relied little on the knowing references, and heavily on telling an original and moving story.

**John Duder**  
Walsall  
dudler@compuserve.com

Dear Editors:

I haven't previously joined the game of Westfahl-bashing, but there are limits. His piece in this month's magazine ("The Sky is Appalling," *IZ* 134) is just too crass.

Item: He quotes the statistic of "a hundred million to one" against a giant meteor impact while neglecting to mention that it relates to a single, named year. If the human race is good for another thousand years, it's down to a hundred thousand to one, and so on.

Item: He neglects the well-known statistic that astronomical objects increase in number as they decrease in mass. Thus you don't need an asteroid big enough to have been named to cause millions of deaths and many billions of dollars worth of damage, and it's a lot more likely. By sheer good luck both the Tungus event of 1908 and the Novoprovka event of 1947 fell in sparsely populated Siberia. I suggest he contemplate the effect of a thousand-ton job on the Home counties, Greater Los Angeles, or anywhere in the Med.

Item: He undermines his own argument when he considers the effect of attempting to deflect an asteroid. As he says himself, the target is tiny and space huge, so once you know it's headed for a direct hit or at least a very near miss, any significant deflection will save your bacon, whatever the elements of the orbit. The trick is to hit it while it's still well away, and for that the best



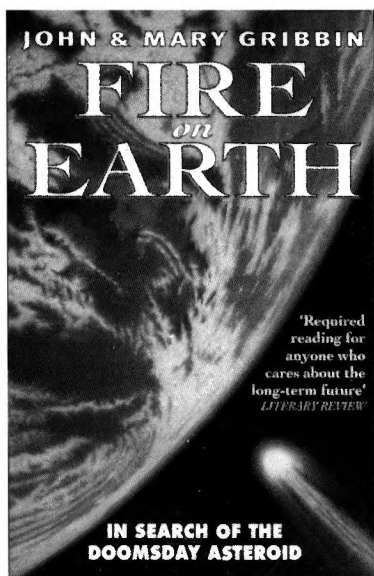
solution is a space-launched missile with its own radar and on-board computer for fine course-corrections.

Item: I share his concern about the possibility of nuclear war between India and Pakistan, but for his information, the Cold War is over. In any case, how closely allied are Pakistan and the US? As I recall, during the Gulf War some 300 *soi-disant* holy men from Pakistan turned up in Baghdad to egg Saddam on, and they were establishment figures, not dissidents.

Finally, there is one serious objection to the orbital missile battery, which is that a madman might gain control of it and target it on his wife and her lover, or the Romish Antichrist, or the Indian atomic weapons research facility; after all, that or something like it happened at Chernobyl. You do need safeguards, but a three-fold set of codes, each held in a separate location, ought to be enough. If you want four- or five-fold, I'm agreeable.

**Chris Gilmore**  
Bedford

**Editor:** John Gribbin has also responded to the Westfahl column by sending us another copy of his book about big rocks hitting our planet, *Fire on Earth* (previously listed in our "Books Received" last year: Simon & Schuster/Pocket, 1997, £6.99). It does make for an enlightening – and frightening – read, and we're passing it on to Gary Westfahl in America.



Dear Editors:

I was a little puzzled that Paul Brazier felt insulted by my letter on Paul Cornell's comments (issue 132, page 5). That said, his response misses the point I was making with the Spinrad quote on Show Business, namely that the Dr Who novels and the New Adventures (and every other media tie-in) are a marketing exercise designed to exploit a fan-base. Sorry Paul, but Showbiz ain't confined to Hollywood.

However, that's a fact of life in publishing today. But what gets my goat is that writers give themselves over to this meretricious process, then turn around and try to lay claim to being new and fresh. Why aren't people like Justin Richards, Steven Lyons, John Peel, Paul Leonard and the rest writing original stories unique to their own imaginations, stories informed by personal experi-

ence and burning with their own visionary intensity? Or would that prove to be too much like hard work?

And if the true answer is neither fannish or financial, then what is it about sf in Britain today that fails to inspire them to originality?

**Mike Cobley**  
Glasgow

Dear Editors:

The Jim Burns cover of the June issue (no. 132) was striking, but I can't help but wonder how the lady avoids getting her luxuriant hairdo caught inside her space helmet. I suspect that, now or in the future, space persons of whatever gender must wear their hair more like that of Jim Kruger, the entirely fictional literary critic in Ian Watson's entirely fictional but quite witty "What Actually Happened in Docklands."

Verily, I can attest (if you will allow me to slip into a more fantasy-like idiom for a moment) that nothing of the sort happened at the World Fantasy Convention last November. I, not exactly alone, survived to tell thee, and largely the way I survived was the discovery of where the cheap eats are in Docklands, which is to say not in Docklands at all, but in Greenwich, whither I journeyed the very first day, before the convention had really started, operating just nicely, thank you, on adrenaline, about an hour of sleep due to jet-lag, and, of course, a mere provincial's wonder at treading the veritable sidewalks and cobblestoned-paths of the Mother Country. Ten minutes away from the convention hotel by train is the Thames, and unless one is a claustrophobe it is the work of a few minutes to walk under the river by tunnel, and there amid the quaint shops and bus fumes of Greenwich are numerous very good and reasonably priced restaurants. I had a satisfactory and filling dinner in a Chinese noodle shop for three pounds, in the course of which I looked at my watch and discovered that it was 5:30 pm; and it seemed I had better get back to the hotel to actually register before they sold my room. I was able to do so in considerably less time than it took one if Ian's characters to obtain his entirely fictional pizza.

But whilst in Greenwich I had a

Vision. Atop the hill in Greenwich, by the Observatory, is probably the only place you'll encounter clean air in the London area. From that lofty height I could look toward London and see the towers of the Docklands floating, ethereal and faerie-like, above the almost solid brown bank of late autumn smog. This is a familiar enough situation from innumerable generic fantasy quest novels: the towers of Mordor-by-another name, like a double-exposure on the landscape, not really a part of it, an evil illusion to be dispelled by the Pure of Heart who can See Things As They Are.

This is how I can attest to the entirely fictional nature of Ian's story. The Docklands are an illusion, superimposed on the old, quaint England so beloved of Ian's other entirely fictional writer-character, Andrew Oakley. The Magic Woods will return – for indeed they have never left – as will the teeming Limehouse district of earlier times, where once again we may perhaps glimpse Fu Manchu and his half-caste minions in the furtive dark. They'd know what to do if someone tried to charge £11 for parking or took an hour and a half to produce pizza.

Therefore, since it takes place within an imaginary or illusory setting, the characters in Ian's story bear no resemblance to real persons living or dead.

**Darrell Schweitzer**  
Philadelphia, PA

Dear Editors:

Re your note in issue 134's "Books Received" (bottom right of page 65) on the subject of the British Film Institute's Modern Classics – just in case you still need to know, this series of small books includes:

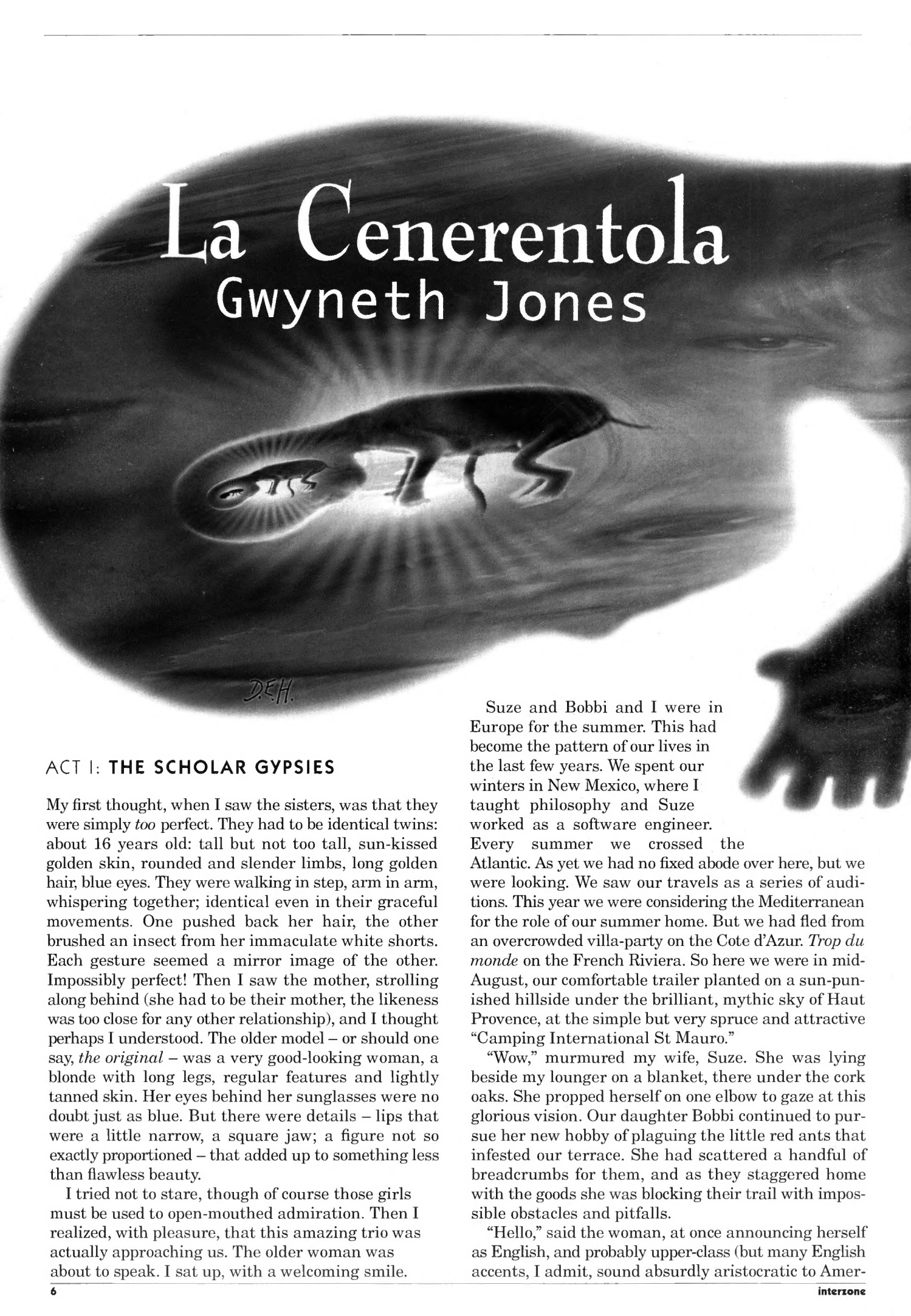
*Blade Runner* by Scott Bukatman  
*Blue Velvet* by Michael Atkinson  
*Don't Look Now* by Mark Sanderson  
*The Exorcist* by Mark Kermode  
*The Right Stuff* by Tom Charity  
*The Terminator* by Sean French  
*The Thing* by Anne Billson

It's a spinoff from the BFI Film Classics series, which includes (among many others):

*L'Age d'Or* by Paul Hammond  
*The Birds* by Camille Paglia  
*Bride of Frankenstein* by Alberto Manguel  
*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* by David Robinson  
*The Ghost and Mrs Muir* by Frieda Grafe  
*Performance* by Colin MacCabe  
*The Seventh Seal* by Melvyn Bragg  
*Things to Come* by Christopher Frayling  
*The Wizard of Oz* by Salman Rushdie

**Kim Newman**  
London





# La Cenerentola

## Gwyneth Jones

### ACT I: THE SCHOLAR GYPSIES

My first thought, when I saw the sisters, was that they were simply *too* perfect. They had to be identical twins: about 16 years old: tall but not too tall, sun-kissed golden skin, rounded and slender limbs, long golden hair, blue eyes. They were walking in step, arm in arm, whispering together; identical even in their graceful movements. One pushed back her hair, the other brushed an insect from her immaculate white shorts. Each gesture seemed a mirror image of the other. Impossibly perfect! Then I saw the mother, strolling along behind (she had to be their mother, the likeness was too close for any other relationship), and I thought perhaps I understood. The older model – or should one say, *the original* – was a very good-looking woman, a blonde with long legs, regular features and lightly tanned skin. Her eyes behind her sunglasses were no doubt just as blue. But there were details – lips that were a little narrow, a square jaw; a figure not so exactly proportioned – that added up to something less than flawless beauty.

I tried not to stare, though of course those girls must be used to open-mouthed admiration. Then I realized, with pleasure, that this amazing trio was actually approaching us. The older woman was about to speak. I sat up, with a welcoming smile.

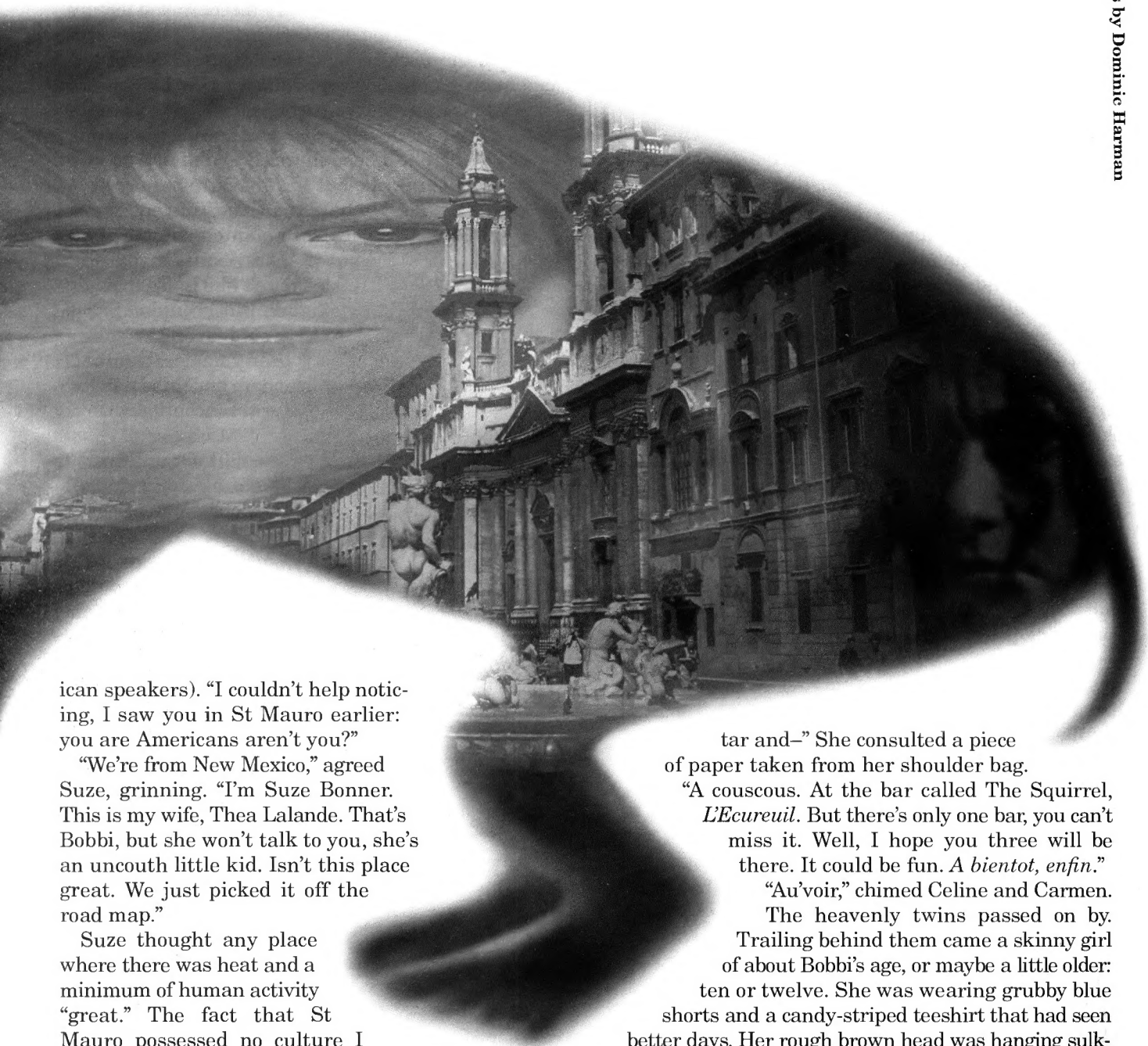
Suze and Bobbi and I were in Europe for the summer. This had become the pattern of our lives in the last few years. We spent our winters in New Mexico, where I taught philosophy and Suze worked as a software engineer.

Every summer we crossed the Atlantic. As yet we had no fixed abode over here, but we were looking. We saw our travels as a series of auditions. This year we were considering the Mediterranean for the role of our summer home. But we had fled from an overcrowded villa-party on the Cote d'Azur. *Trop du monde* on the French Riviera. So here we were in mid-August, our comfortable trailer planted on a sun-punished hillside under the brilliant, mythic sky of Haut Provence, at the simple but very spruce and attractive "Camping International St Mauro."

"Wow," murmured my wife, Suze. She was lying beside my lounge on a blanket, there under the cork oaks. She propped herself on one elbow to gaze at this glorious vision. Our daughter Bobbi continued to pursue her new hobby of plaguing the little red ants that infested our terrace. She had scattered a handful of breadcrumbs for them, and as they staggered home with the goods she was blocking their trail with impossible obstacles and pitfalls.

"Hello," said the woman, at once announcing herself as English, and probably upper-class (but many English accents, I admit, sound absurdly aristocratic to Amer-





ican speakers). "I couldn't help noticing, I saw you in St Mauro earlier: you are Americans aren't you?"

"We're from New Mexico," agreed Suze, grinning. "I'm Suze Bonner. This is my wife, Thea Lalande. That's Bobbi, but she won't talk to you, she's an uncouth little kid. Isn't this place great. We just picked it off the road map."

Suze thought any place where there was heat and a minimum of human activity "great." The fact that St Mauro possessed no culture I could drag her around was a further advantage. I sometimes wondered why she allowed me to uproot her from her native desert at all.

"Absolutely ravishing," said our new acquaintance. "And so peaceful. I'm Laura Brown. This is Celine, and this is Carmen. We're staying outside the village." The twins smiled, perfectly. Laura Brown took off her sunglasses and gazed at Bobbi. "Actually, I was wondering if we would see you at the fete tonight."

"Fete?" Bobbi's head came up as if bouncing on a spring. "Will there be fireworks?"

Laura Brown laughed. "I'm afraid not!"

"Unnh." With a shrug, my charming little daughter returned to her evil deeds.

Our new friend, still watching Bobbi with curious attention, went on, "it's a small affair. Flamenco Gui-

tar and—" She consulted a piece of paper taken from her shoulder bag.

"A couscous. At the bar called The Squirrel, *L'Ecoreuil*. But there's only one bar, you can't miss it. Well, I hope you three will be there. It could be fun. *A bientot, enfin.*"

"Au'voir," chimed Celine and Carmen.

The heavenly twins passed on by.

Trailing behind them came a skinny girl of about Bobbi's age, or maybe a little older: ten or twelve. She was wearing grubby blue shorts and a candy-striped teeshirt that had seen better days. Her rough brown head was hanging sulkily, her eyes fixed on the dust she kicked up with her dirty espadrilles. As she came level with us she looked up, and shot Bobbi a baleful glance... I wouldn't have thought she had anything to do with the other three, except that Laura Brown turned and called: "Marianina, please keep up. And don't scuff your shoes like that! My youngest daughter," she explained, as if to excuse the sudden sharpness in her tone. "Such a little ragamuffin. There's nothing I can do about it."

"I wonder what went wrong there," murmured Suze, when the family was out of sight.

"You think the other two, the twins are—?"

"Of course. What else could they be, looking like that?"

Bobbi, naturally, pounced. Children have an infallible ear for their parents' indiscreet remarks. "What?



What are they? What do you think they are?"

"Sssh. Nothing."

"They look like a pair of Barbie dolls," muttered Bobbi.

Suze and I agreed, via a silent exchanged glance, that the subject was closed. Another word, and our darling child would disgrace us by saying something incredibly rude, when we next met the beautiful sisters and their mama.

We decided not to risk the "couscous." We ate pasta under the cork oaks in the shimmering light of evening; with a sauce of stewed red-pepper strips and tomatoes, and a wine of the region which I'd bought from the campsite bureau. It was delicious, that wine: straw-yellow, dry but not too dry; and so delicately, subtly scented! The tepid air was tinged with indigo, the drowsy scent of the scorched *maquis* grew stronger as the sun descended. We seemed poised on a pinnacle of exquisite calm: like a foretaste of Paradise.

Suze touched my hand. "Here?" she murmured.

But my peace was not complete. I was thinking of Laura Brown and her twins, and the sad fate of that dirty little girl, trailing along behind such beautiful older sisters. I didn't answer at once. Suze reached over and traced with her finger a little knot of tension that had formed, without my realizing it, at the corner of my jaw.

"Not here."

She stood up, and stretched. "Why do I get the feeling that we've been invited to this festa by royal command? Well, let's go, anyway. At least we'll have something great to look at."

In spite of Suze's cynicism and my vague misgivings we had a terrific time that night at *L'Ecureuil*. The local population was out in force, far outnumbering us tourists; which always makes for a better atmosphere. The sangria flowed; and the guitarists were superb. Perhaps nothing less would have made the evening so memorable. But from the first, fierce, poignant attack of that music, that stiffened all our spines and opened our eyes wide, the festa was alight. Soon as the first set was over people were talking, laughing, speaking in tongues. Barriers of language, nationality and income vanished. People started dancing on the tiny patio, that looked down on Van Gogh terraces of olive trees in red earth. The stars came out, Suze and I danced together. The mayor of the village, a plump little woman in a purple kaftan and tiny black slippers, danced alone: the genuine flamenco, wherever she'd learned it, with haughty eyes and a fiery precision that brought wild applause. Celine and Carmen, indistinguishable in pretty full-skirted sundresses, one red, one blue, danced with anyone who asked them (I hadn't the courage). Suze said "all we need now is the handsome prince."

"But how's he going to choose between them?"

"He's a fool if he tries. He should take them both!"

I looked for the third daughter, and spotted her sitting in a corner beside a glum, fat woman in a print overall. She was wearing a different teeshirt but the same grubby shorts, and brooding over a half-empty glass of cola. The two of them seemed the only people in the world who weren't enjoying themselves. I know how moody little girls can be. Maybe it was her own

idea not to dress up, and her own plan not to have fun. But I felt sorry for the child.

I was eating the couscous after all – having a good time always makes me hungry – when Mrs Brown came to join me. Suze was with Bobbi, indoors, with the crowd of local kids around the babyfoot machine.

This Englishwoman had a very direct way of asking questions and handing over information. As Suze had remarked, there was something autocratic about her friendliness. She had soon told me that the twins were what we had guessed. They were clones: genetic replicants of their mother, with a few enhancements. It was a simple story. She'd been married to a man who was unfortunately infertile, but luckily extremely rich. It had suited his fancy to have his beautiful young wife copied: and then, two of the implanted embryos had "come through" as she put it. "I carried them myself," she said, "though my husband didn't like it. He thought pregnancy would spoil my figure. But I couldn't bring myself to use a surrogate. It wouldn't be the same, would it? They wouldn't have been completely mine."

Later, the marriage having ended, her third daughter had been the result of a natural conception with a different father...

A mistake, in other words, I thought. Or an experiment that went wrong. Poor kid!

"What about you? Did you carry Bobbi, or did Suze?"

"It was me."

Thea drew the short straw, we used to joke. We both knew I'd been the lucky one. One parent of a fused-egg embryo is always more compatible with the foetus than the other, and that's how the choice of birth-mother is made.

"And, excuse me for asking, did Bobbi have a father?"

I explained, with modest pride, that she was all our own work. The fused-egg embryo treatment, a recombination of the genetic traits from each female partner.

So we confided, quickly becoming intimate; like people who first suspect and then confirm that they are both members of the same secret society. As indeed we were, though there's nothing really secret about modern reproduction technology. Bobbi had never met any prejudice. It helps, no doubt, that you have to be relatively rich, and therefore *de facto* respectable, before you can afford these techniques. I noticed that Mrs Brown's furtive interest in my daughter (which had struck me when we met on the campsite) diminished when she knew Bobbi's provenance. The regal Mrs Brown, I decided, had been afraid we Americans had a better, more advanced model of child than her twins. Now she'd assured herself that this was not the case – that Bobbi was a mere copy of her two mothers, with no improvements – her curiosity vanished. We passed on to other topics.

I wondered if I dared to mention the youngest girl, maybe suggest that she and Bobbi could get together. But when I looked around I couldn't see her. The corner where she'd been lurking was empty.

"What is it?" asked Mrs Brown. "Is something the matter?"

Celine and Carmen were still happily dancing. "I was looking for Marianina."

"Oh, she went back to the villa," she explained casually. "With Germaine, my nanny." She laughed. "Mar-



ianina hates parties. She's too young, she gets so bored." But her eyes wouldn't meet mine. I knew she was hiding something. Marianina, I guessed, had been sent home in some kind of disgrace. Poor little Cinderella!

Bobbi stayed with us at the bar until three am, along with probably every child of her age for miles around except Marianina. We stayed long after Mrs Brown and the beautiful twins had departed, until the very end of the party: when the flamenco guitarists joyously played and everybody sang, at the tops of our voices, the simplest of drinking songs: the songs that everybody in Europe knows; or sings along anyway.

– *ce soir je buvais!*

*ce soir je buvais heureux!*

A few hours later I woke up in the trailer, with a terrible hangover and the dim memory of Suze trying in vain to get me to take an Alco-soothe. Since even miraculous modern medicine can do little about the morning after once you've let things get that far, I got up. I took a tepid shower in our tiny closet bathroom and went for a walk to clear my head.

That covetable pitch on the topmost terrace, which we had admired when we first arrived, had fallen vacant. The red car that had been parked there had disappeared; so had the little climbing tent. I went up there and sat on a rock, in blissful solitude, gazing southward towards the twinkling three-cornered smile of the sea. I was thinking of a paper I had to write, for a conference in the fall; and of finding a house in Provence or the Alps Maritime, with vines around the door and a roof of roman tiles. It was so difficult to choose a resting place, in this summer world where neither Suze nor I had any roots. Too much freedom can be as frustrating as too little.

I wondered if I could see the villa where Mrs Brown was staying.

I didn't notice the little girl who came scrambling up the hill until she burst out of the bushes right in front of me – and stood there, glowering, holding what looked like a bottle of shampoo. It was Marianina. She had been expecting someone, but not me. This was my first impression as the child stood, stared, and then came slowly towards me.

"You left this behind in the showers," she said, in French.

"No, it's not mine."

It was very odd. I couldn't think what she was doing on the campsite, or why she was pretending that she'd come from the *sanitaires*, when those modest toilet facilities were in completely the opposite direction from her approach. She was dressed as she had been at *L'Ecureuil*, the same shorts and the same teeshirt. The contrast between this girl and the rest of her family was more startling in their absence: to think of all that golden perfection and see Marianina's rough brown head, her scratched, dust-smearred arms and legs as thin as knotted wire. She went on staring at me unpleasantly: a child already embodying the threat of adolescence, a neglected child who would throw stones, let down tires, perhaps steal. Perhaps she had stolen the bottle of shampoo.

"Were you looking for someone?" I tried not to sound aggressive.

"So, they've gone," said the little girl.

"Who?"

"My friends." She came closer: closer than was comfortable. Still sitting on my rock, I was trapped by her scrawny, demanding presence. I could feel her breath.

"What is it?"

"We were going to make a rocket." She still spoke in French. "But they've gone."

"I don't understand you. What do you want?"

With an indescribably sly and ugly smile, she thrust a finger into the open mouth of her plastic bottle, and then pulled it out covered in pale slime.

I jumped up. Perhaps I was over-reacting, but I did not like the situation. I didn't want any part of a little girl – perhaps ten, twelve years old – who behaved like this. I did not want to be alone with her. As I sprang to my feet the child darted away. I went to the edge of the terrace and saw her, half-way down the hill already, slithering on her bony little rump. As I watched she reached the level ground, turned and stood malignly repeating that sexual-seeming play with the bottle and her grubby finger.

Back at our trailer Suze was making breakfast, breaking fresh eggs into fragrant melted butter. The bread van had arrived at the campsite gates, tooting like a steam-train. Bobbi came running back from there with





an armful of warm baguettes. I made coffee. I didn't mention my encounter. We ate our *petit déjeuner sur l'herbe*, and I talked about the paper I was writing.

"How do you copy a chair?" I asked Bobbi.

"You could draw a picture."

"That would be a picture of a chair. Another chair is another sum of things taken out of the world. A certain quantity of wood, metal or plastics: varnish, maybe nails, wear on the machinery or tools; a measurable expense of food, or energy from whatever source. Something for something. It's like double-entry book-keeping. A thousand chairs means a thousand objects at a certain cost per unit. One can bring that cost down, but it is always, allowing for all your expenses, a substantial fraction of the first amount. But if you copy a piece of software a thousand times, what is the cost?"

I was getting my own back for the times when Suze, the scientist, would hold our baby entranced: explaining the table of the elements, the anatomy of a star.

"Erm, wear and tear on the keyboard? Wear and tear on the storage disc!"

"Infinitesimal," I said. "And not equivalent in the same way. This is the problem, Bobbi, and it isn't just a problem of economics. We have a system of values, of *morality*, based on people competing with each other to copy things, at the lowest possible cost per unit. That's capitalism. But when the cost, the object of all this competition, effectively disappears, what happens to our system? Life gets very puzzling. Do you remember the Mickey Mouse episode in *Fantasia*? When Mickey uses the magician's spell, and the magic broomsticks just keep on coming, appearing out of nothing, more and more of them, and they won't stop?"

I'd decided to call my paper *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

"Leave the kid alone, Thea," said my wife, passing me plate of eggs and dropping a kiss on the tip of Bobbi's freckled nose. "She has no idea what you're talking about, poor baby."

"No, I like it!" cried our daughter, bouncing up and down. "I like it! Let her tell me!"

Our miracle of the modern world: made possible by prosaic laboratory science, but to us completely magical. I thought of that other little girl and her starved, all-too-knowing eyes.

I went to the bureau to buy more of that wine. The manageress, an Italian woman with bushy black hair and a beak of a nose, was in a talkative mood. I had the impression that she approved of Suze and Bobbi and myself. She liked our American passports. She liked the fact that Suze and I were married, a pleasant example of the new world (a newer world than the USA!) showing affection and respect for the old ways. I mentioned the English family, and learned that Mrs Brown was not a regular visitor. She had arrived in St Mauro for the first time a week before: but she had created a good impression by spending money locally. We agreed that the twins were phenomenally pretty.

"And the youngest girl. I suppose she's made friends with some other children on the campsite? I saw her here this morning." I was uneasy about that child. Her malevolence, or her unhappiness, had cast a shadow on me.

"Ah. *La Cenerentola*!" The woman grimaced and shook her head.

It was the name I'd used myself. "Why do you call her Cinderella? Because of her sisters? The Brown sisters certainly aren't ugly!"

"I call her that because she's a sad case. Something went wrong, eh? One only has to look at the older girls to see what they are to the mother." She shrugged. "Vanity-parenting! I've heard of it. But it looks as if, the third time, Madame wasted her money."

I suppose one has to meet prejudice sometime. I muttered, (embarrassed, but feeling it was my duty to defend Mrs Brown), that Bobbi was also the result of an artificial technique.

"Listen. I'm not saying it's wrong. It's the fruit of it. Why bear a child, no matter how the baby was conceived, just to do her harm?" The Italian woman drew herself up, looked from right to left, and leaned darkly forward over her desk, with its innocent sheaves of bright-coloured tourist leaflets. "You saw her here, eh?" she hissed. "Do you know why she was here on my camping, *la Cenerentola*? She was looking for the couple who have left, those climbers. And do you know what she wanted with them?"

"Er, no."

"Well, I know. That is why they left, obviously, so suddenly: because she'd been with them, and they were ashamed. It was the woman, I expect. She did it too but she was ashamed, and she wanted to get her man away from the nastiness. Believe me, I tell you what I think. I don't say the couple weren't to blame. But it surely was not the first time for *la Cenerentola*. A child doesn't go around asking for that. Not unless she is getting it already, eh? Eh?"

I escaped, feeling terrible. If there wasn't a word of truth in the manageress's vicious gossip, it was still extremely distasteful. The next thing I knew, I'd be under suspicion myself. When I got the chance (while Bobbi spent the afternoon sleeping off her late night) I told Suze everything. We agreed that the child *did* look neglected, and there really might be something wrong, something ugly going on. What could we do? Nothing.

But Mauro had turned sour on us. It was time to move on.

## ACT II: CINDERELLA AND HER SISTERS

Two weeks later we were in a seaside town called Santa Margarita, south of Livorno. We'd decided to give up camping for a while, and reserved rooms through the international clearing-house site on the internet, that boon to impulse-travellers – our booking whirled in digital fragments by the wild logic of the global network, from Siena to Livorno via Hawaii, and Tokyo, and Helsinki. The hotel overlooked a quiet, bright piazza: a Renaissance chapel with twisted-candy marble pillars, a pizzeria and a cafe.

"It's quiet *now*," said Suze. "But at three in the afternoon, anywhere is quiet. Think of the noise at night."

"Oh please, oh please," begged Bobbi, who only wanted to get to the beach.

The padrone explained that the window shutters were completely soundproof

"My wife suffers from asthma, and cannot bear a stuffy atmosphere."



Ah, but when the shutters were closed tight these rooms – two pretty rooms, and a bathroom between them – would still be airy, beautifully airy, the way you Americans like, because of the inner courtyard–

I stepped out with him onto the open gallery. We looked down, we looked up. He explained the ingenious and environmentally sound air-conditioning system. It was a very nice courtyard, with a fountain pool in the centre and big planters full of greenery. I was delighted with our choice. I suspected Suze was delighted as well, but she was angling for a discount. My Suze always liked to squeeze the envelope: always trying to get the work done with one instruction the less.

“Suze, this place is lovely–” I began, perfidiously. I looked up, once more. *La Cenerentola* was leaning over the gallery rail on the floor above, staring at me. I stepped backwards, really shaken. That sour little face, peering down at me: so vivid, it was like an hallucination.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Let’s go away. Let’s think about it.”

“Madame, is something wrong?”

“Thea! You look as if you’re going to faint!”

And alas for me, I almost *did* faint. I was dizzy, it was the heat, maybe my period was coming on. I couldn’t explain myself, I couldn’t possibly tell the truth. Naturally, by the time the padrone had fussed over me, and his wife had administered delicious lemonade (for the sugar, the best thing for faintness), all discussion was over. We were installed.

But in any case I wasn’t frightened any more. What was there to be frightened about?

I was left at the hotel, lying down, because of my faintness, while Suze took Bobbi for her first swim (the padrone having given careful directions to a very nice, really clean beach). I felt fine. After an hour or so I got up, and went out. There in the piazza, sitting alone at a table outside the cafe, I saw Laura Brown.

It seemed to me that we were both struck by the same emotions. We saw each other, would have liked to pretend not to recognize each other: we accepted the inevitable.

She smiled, I smiled. She beckoned me to join her.

“It was at Mauro,” I said. “In Provence –”

“But of course I remember. Thea and Suze, the American couple with the charming daughter. And you’re staying at La Fontana? What a coincidence!”

She insisted on buying me a drink, I ordered a coke. I spoke of Bobbi, and how difficult it could be to keep a child entertained. I suggested (my voice almost shaking, I had such a bad conscience about my suspicions) she must have the same problem with Marianina. Maybe the two little girls could be company for each other?

It was all so normal. A holiday acquaintance, that neither of us really wished to pursue. Why did I have the strange conviction that as soon as I was out of sight, Mrs Laura Brown would leap up, rush into the hotel, collect her family, pack her bags and flee – like someone guilty of a monstrous crime?

I was wrong. The next day, Suze and Bobbi and I went together to the very nice, very clean beach. Almost at once I spotted Mrs Brown and her daughters. The twins, in matching green and gold bikinis, were unmistakable. The little girl, as usual, was sitting on her own, ignored by her sisters. I tried to stop myself from watching them. The beach was expensive (Suze muttered bitterly about the entrance fee) but it was beautiful. The Mediterranean, whatever the actual analysis of the water, was on its best behaviour: warm, silky, crystal clear. We sunbathed, we swam, we played ball. We had a delightful picnic, we lay in the sun.

“Tuscany?” murmured Suze, “Culture for you, the beach for me.” She touched my hand, as we lay in the shade of our jaunty umbrella, while Bobbi splashed in the sea. “Here?”

But I was distracted. “I think I’ll take a little walk.”

I thought I would go up and say hi. I would say hi, and get a close look at Marianina. Your Cinderella daughter, Mrs Brown. Do you treat her badly? Do you use her worse than a servant? I felt myself a sadly inadequate fairy godmother, but at least I would try to assure myself that there was no need, that the problem was in my imagination. Mrs Brown and her twins were lying on identical hired loungers. Laura Brown was reading a paperback. Celine and Carmen no longer looked so beautiful now that I believed their sister was being in some way abused. They were giggling and





chatting, heads together.

Marianina didn't get a lounge, she was sitting on the sand.

As I approached I was feeling extremely self-conscious. My courage failed: maybe I would give them a wave and walk on by. The sunlight glittered. Suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, where there had been three sun-loungers there was only one. Mrs Brown and *la Cenerentola* were alone.

So then I did go up to them, propelled by sheer amazement.

"Hello," I said. And stood there, dumbstruck.

"Hello," said the lady, putting aside her book. I noticed that her bikini was also green and gold. Her eyes were hidden, her smile was frost in the sun.

"There were three of you here just a moment ago," I blurted: and corrected myself in confusion. "I mean four. You and the twins, and the little girl."

The cold smile faded. "It's Thea, isn't it? How nice to see you again. Good day." Mrs Brown returned to her book.

*La Cenerentola* was sitting at her mother's feet, wearing only a pair of dark-blue bikini pants. Her nipples were crusted with sand. She stared at me without speaking.

I went back to Suze, extremely confused. "Suze, you'll never believe this. The clones, Mrs Brown's beautiful twins, I just saw them disappear. They vanished right in front of my eyes! Do you think I'm going crazy?"

Suze rolled over, and glared at me. "Save it for your paper, Thea."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm tired of this. What is your problem with that family? What is so fascinating about them? You've talked about nothing else for days." She jumped up, and stalked off to join Bobbi.

Suze didn't say another word about the Browns, but she must have been looking out for them. When we were leaving, at sunset, along with everyone else, she marched us across the car park to a big white Mercedes Solar that I remembered having seen in Mauro. Marianina was in the car. The twins were helping their mother to pack their beach stuff into the trunk.

"Hi, Laura," said Suze. "Hi Carmen, hi Celine."

"Hi, Mrs Bonner," chorused the twins sweetly, with their identical smile.

We walked away, Suze glowering triumphantly. I thought I'd better not mention that to me the beautiful twins had looked somehow *diminished*... Like two coloured shadows of their former selves. The next morning I saw Mrs Brown again, for the last time. I was up early, Suze was in the shower. Mrs Brown and her family were checking out. Germaine, the nanny, was directing the porter, who was carrying their bags out to the car. Marianina was with her. Celine and Carmen stood looking a little lost, while their mother validated her credit, by passing an imperious hand across the identity-reading screen. Mrs Brown gave a sharp glance up at the stairs, where I was standing. She moved towards the door. Then Celine and Carmen... they melted. They flowed, they ran like liquid glass through the air. There was only one golden-haired figure, walking away.

I rushed up to the desk. "Did you see that?" I

demanded. "Did you see? Flavia! Tell me!"

The desk clerk was our *padrone's* daughter, a sensible and intelligent girl. For a moment I thought she was going to deny everything. Perhaps she realized the truth was the best way to suppress my curiosity. She looked up, with wise young eyes.

"Dottora Lalande, two weeks ago a gentleman stayed here who was travelling with an *eidolon*, a hologram of his dead wife. We must set a place for her, serve dishes to her, arrange her room. He spoke to the digitally-generated image as if it was alive. And though I know this is impossible, I am sure I heard the lady answer."

"What are you telling me?"

"And there was the family from Germany, with the teenage boy who had taken gene therapy to cure a terrible wasting disease. He was completely well, it was a miracle. At night this boy stayed out late. He came back to La Fontana not quite himself, you understand? Luckily, he could leap and hit the night-bell with his muzzle, so the porter would let him in. And it was easy enough to wash the paw prints from the sheets."

"What are you saying?"

"One sees everything, in the hotel trade, and one mentions nothing. These things happen, they happen more and more. It's best simply to accept them... and look the other way."

Mrs Brown had left no address, but I managed to get Flavia to tell me she had been heading north, to the Lakes. Over breakfast I tried to convince Suze that we had to follow and somehow track them down. I knew she was already angry with me over the Browns, but I couldn't help myself. I felt there was a disaster that I must try to avert. Suze accused me of being infatuated, either with Laura Brown or the heavenly twins. She refused to consider the idea of leaving Santa Margarita.

When Suze and Bobbi went to the beach, I stayed behind. I took our guide-book and set out to explore the town, in the hope that some distraction would help me to think. I had not dared to tell Suze about my second strange experience. For one thing, I suspected that young Flavia wouldn't back me up. But much as I hated to fight with Suze, I was desperate to unravel the mystery. What was happening to Celine and Carmen, and why? Had the desk clerk and I shared a hallucination? Or were Cinderella's sisters really capable of vanishing into thin air?

*La Cenerentola* was there. She had climbed on the railings outside the Renaissance chapel. She was swinging from them, head down, her feet kicking in the air and her hair brushing the ancient stone of the porch steps. As I approached she flung herself down, carelessly scattering the passers-by, and stood glaring at me. She was wearing her favourite grubby shorts and teeshirt. As soon as she saw that she'd been recognized, she ran away.

Of course, I followed.

Marianina didn't run too fast. She made sure that I could keep up. Before long I found her waiting for me, in the small formal gardens that surrounded the much-eroded remains of a Roman temple; on the edge of the pedestrianized centre. It was a quiet place. This was the end of summer, and the flowerbeds had been allowed to fade. The Roman fountain in their midst was dry, the



benches around about stood empty. There was a chirping of insects, clear above the distant hum of traffic.

Children, when they're left to run wild, are uncouth creatures. They'll tell silly, arbitrary lies if they feel caught out, but not one in a thousand will naturally invent the concept of polite conversation. Marianina didn't say a word to me at first. She sat on a lump of carved stone, its meaning eroded beyond recognition, and examined a graze on her knee.

"I thought you guys had left Santa Margarita," I offered, oppressed by her silence.

"We moved to a different hotel. We're leaving tomorrow."

"At the campsite in Mauro," I said, "they called you *la Cenerentola*: Cinderella, because of your sisters. Is it true? Did they make you feel left out?"

The child flashed me one of her sly, hostile glances. "Mummy sent me to wait for you. She says, leave us alone. Stop following us. There's nothing you can do."

Prince Charming, I thought, rejected the step-sisters, their artificial finery and their contrived attractions. He chose the dirty girl: with her little hands as rough as the cinders, her careless rags, her knobbly knees, her insouciant independence. It was the same with Laura Brown. I had thought I understood everything: right from that first night, when she told me her story at *L'Ecoreuil*. It had been obvious that she had not been interested in either of her children's fathers. There was no adult lover in her life. Maybe she was one of those people who cannot tolerate another adult as a lover... That was why Marianina, scorned in public, had become the secret object of her affections, as the twins grew older.

I could understand how a child like this, deliberately humoured in all her native childish awkwardness (the sequences of DNA randomly recombined, no perfections but those of untamed chance and necessity) might seem the fairest, the true beauty. I could feel her troubling allure myself, and I'm no paedophile. She was so *real*.

The Italian woman at the campsite had made up a vicious story which probably had no basis at all in fact. A child can be corrupted, without any gross abuse. But whatever the actual relationship between Marianina and her mother, I now saw that the situation was not

that simple. Perhaps it never is.

"What about your sisters? Will they be travelling with you?"

"Oh, them." A smug grimace. "I don't think they'll be around much longer."

I felt suddenly chilled. "What do you mean, they won't be around?"

"She hasn't said. But I think Mummy's taking them back."

Marianina slid to the ground, scouring the backside of those long-suffering shorts.

"Taking them back? Back where?"

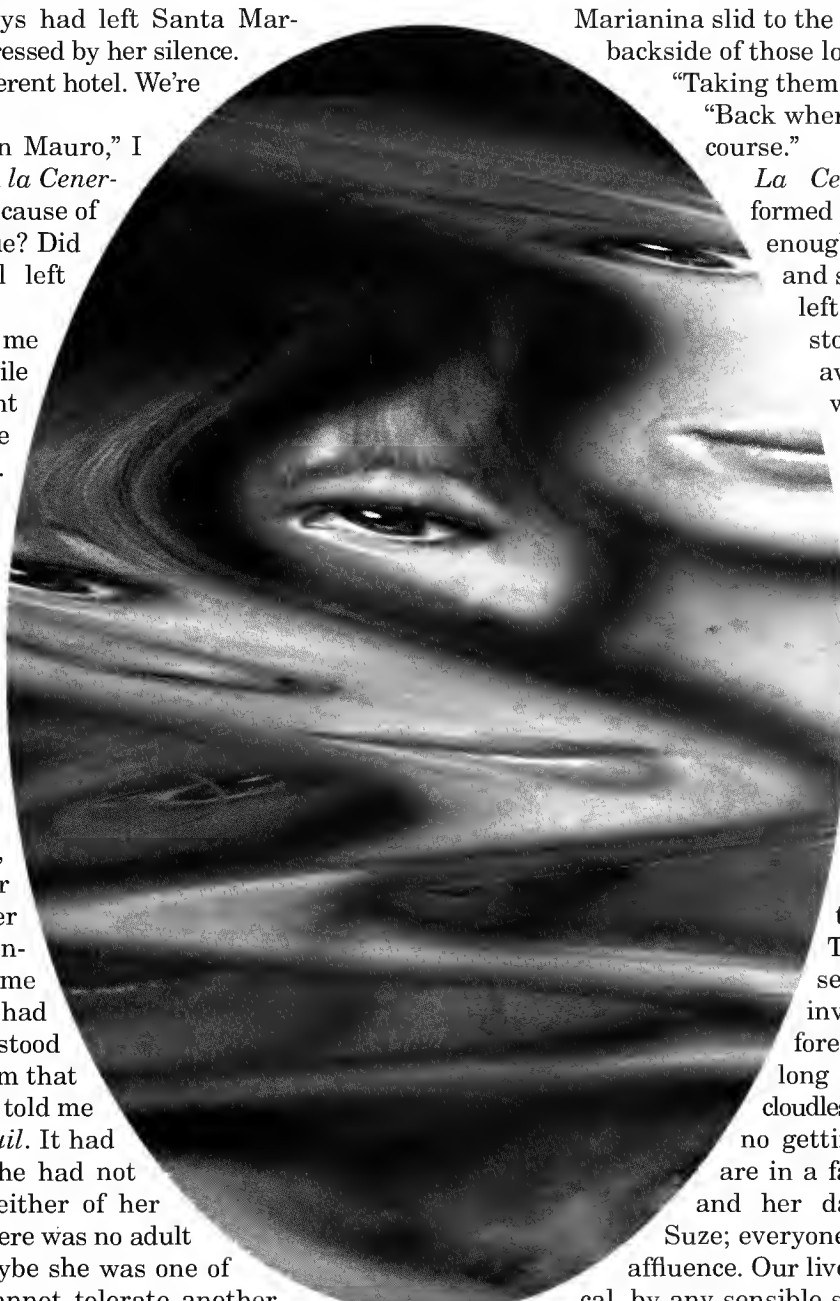
"Back where they *came from*, of course."

*La Cenerentola* had performed her errand. She'd had enough of my solemn eyes and stupid questions. She left, jumping over the stones and skipping away, without another word.

#### INTERLUDE: THE PHILOSOPHER'S DREAM

I see a room in an appealing little hotel, somewhere in the north of Italy. It's a room that Suze and Thea could have chosen: deceptively simple, with every modern comfort hidden in a tasteful, traditional disguise. Through the window I see (but this is pure invention) a view of forests and mountains, a long blue lake under a cloudless fairy-tale sky. There's no getting away from it, we are in a fairy tale. Mrs Brown and her daughters, Thea and Suze; everyone else who shares our affluence. Our lives have become magical, by any sensible standards. Nothing is impossible, the strangest things can happen.

I see a beautiful woman, and the twin daughters who might be her sisters: daughters with that uncanny, replicant perfection of the optimized clone. She told me that their creation was her husband's idea. I don't know if I believe that, but in any case she has become tired of these flawless, sweet-natured dolls. The double mirror irritates her. The twins are sitting in a window embrasure, talking softly with each other. Perhaps they are deciding what they will wear tomorrow. They take comfort in clothes and make-up, because they know they have been superseded. I witness the transformation scene. I see how the two bodies are magically drawn across the room, and melt – at first resisting des-





perately, but finally calm – into the original of their flesh.

It is a triumph that *la Cenerentola* in the story might have longed for, before she dreamt of going to the ball. Fathers are chancy creatures, the handsome prince is a shadowy promise. But mother, even if she is not completely your own mother, is the first object of any child's desire.

Now Cinderella is alone, with the only handsome prince this version of the story needs. Poor Carmen, poor Celine. This time it is forever.

## FINALE

I don't believe we'll ever get tired of Bobbi. I don't know which of us loves her more. But a long vacation brings out the strains in any relationship. I begin to wonder what would happen, if we should tire of each other. We walk hand in hand, Suze and Bobbi and I, and suddenly I suspect that we're taking up more space than three people should. I look up and see Suze a little further away from me than she ought to be. The air shimmers. For a moment there are two Bobbis... I am afraid that these moments may grow longer in duration. It won't be possible to hide the embarrassing thing that has happened, except by moving on: going our separate ways with our separate daughters, and praying that no further dilution occurs.

We have beaten the stern old gods of the 19th century. But in escaping from them, could it be that we have let something wild and dangerous back into the

world? Our magical technology may have unsuspected costs. In the end, stretched and spread over the world as we are by our desires, perhaps Suze and I will vanish like Mrs Brown's perfect twins. We will lose hold of our fantastical riches and fade away, like the ball-dress, the pumpkin-coach, the rat coachman... in this case leaving nothing behind, not even a glass slipper.

**Gwyneth Jones** wrote the above story for the bilingual anthology *Frontiers*, published on the occasion of the 3rd Portuguese science-fiction and fantasy convention, held from 19th to 27th September 1998. The anthology includes, besides the Gwyneth Jones story, an original story from Stephen Baxter and a selection of fiction by Portuguese and Brazilian authors, all texts in both English and Portuguese. It can be ordered at £8 (\$14 US) from: Simetria FC&F, Av. da Republica, Pavilho do Dramatico de Cascais, 2750 Cascais, Portugal (e-mail: [simetria@esoterica.pt](mailto:simetria@esoterica.pt)). Previous years' editions (1996, 1997) are available, at £7 (\$11.50 US) each, including handling and mailing. Payment is accepted in US or British currency or Portuguese escudos, by Eurocheque or money order made out to "Simetria FC&F"

# THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE

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**Y**ou have often impressed myself and others not only with the quality of your writing and your imagination but with your knowledge of modern science and technology. Is this born out of a passion, necessary study or a natural inclination?

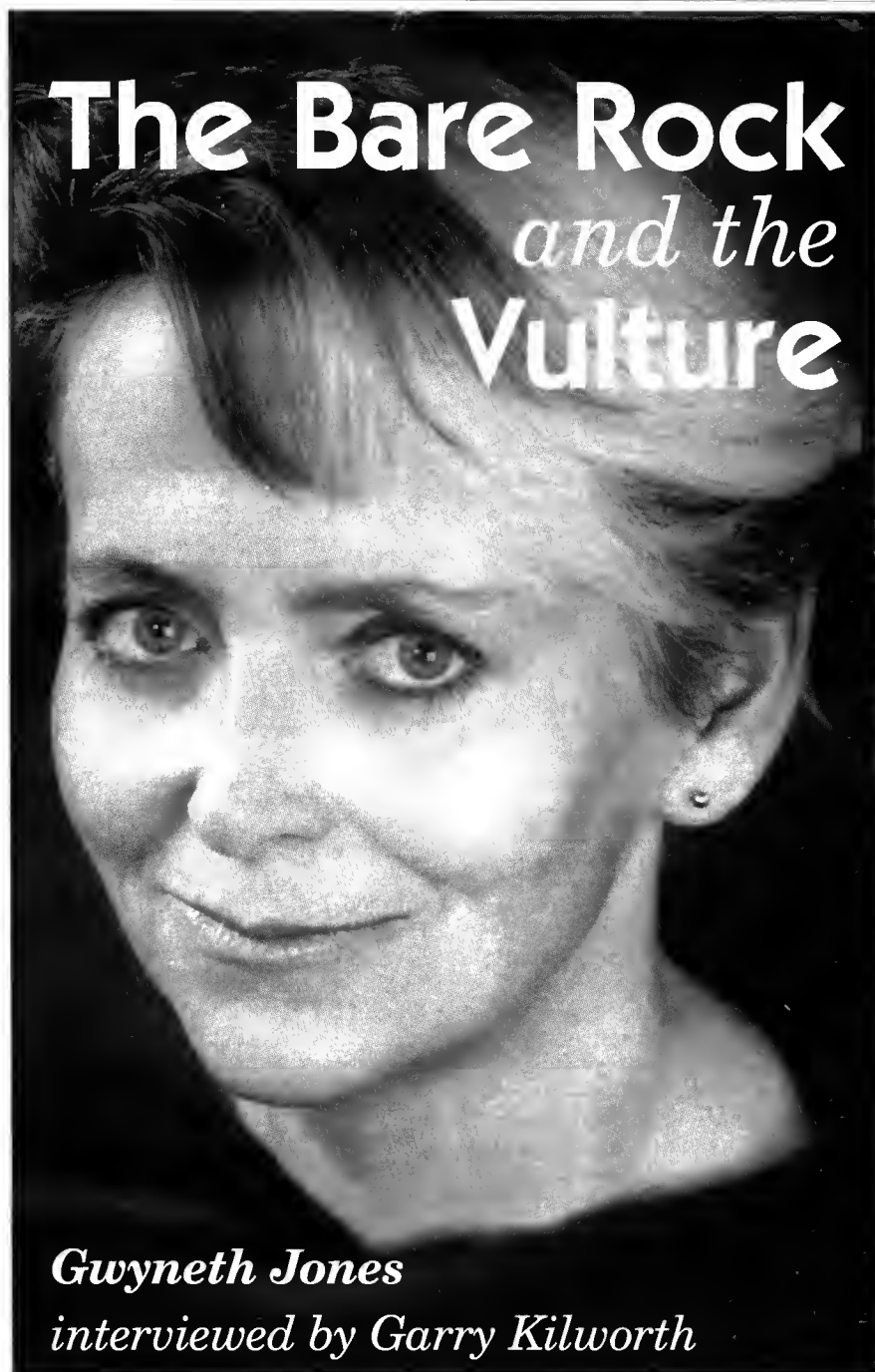
If I'd been able to pass Maths "O" Level I would be a biologist now. (Probably an out-of-work biologist, or a chasing-short-contracts-with-no-future biologist, but that's where I'd be). I'm not too bad with numbers, and I fondly think I *might* have done better, if the maths teaching at my girls' grammar school hadn't been so poor, almost as bad as the physics and chemistry. Biology, however, was taught brilliantly, and I had loved messing about pretending to be a "naturalist" from a very early age. When I started reading sf it was the nifty ideas about science that appealed to me first – the *Analogue* sort of story, ironically enough. And I've kept up. I think a lot of the starry-eyed propaganda about science (meaning new gadgets, basically) being the answer to everything is absurd. But I read more popular science books than anything else, if I'm reading for my own pleasure, and not only biology texts. I can get just as interested in Theories of Everything, or radio astronomy, if the writing is good.

*Are you a crusader? If so, what is your cause?*

Is this a trick question? A crusader is someone who sets off to liberate a place he calls The Holy Land and ends up sacking the very Christian city of Constantinople (or Istanbul), as a result of a pay dispute... am I right? I'm someone who believes in things, I'm not sure how to define it more clearly than that, and I *try* to stick with what I believe in, and write (and behave) accordingly. To me this is a normal attitude, but I suppose to some people it might be remarkable and even extremist.

*Is there anything you can't abide in the writing of others?*

There are lots of things I can't abide in the writing of others. There are plenty of things I can't abide in the writing of Gwyneth Jones, but luckily I'm so used to my own besetting sins they don't bother me most of the time. However, if you want a serious answer, one thing I *really* can't abide relates to your previous question: I hate the kind of writing that takes up moral or political issues purely on the basis of what's fashionable (or marketable), at the given moment. Like those megababe models who gave up wearing fur and spoke sincerely about how sorry they were for the poor little animals – and then, when the fashion for animal rights



had run its course, they started wearing fur again, with the equally sincere explanation "well, it seems to be okay to say you like fur this season." Not that I consider wearing fur such a dreadful crime, it's the awful, doll-eyed innocence of the rationale. Like, gee, I was doing fine with my lesbian starship captain, but I guess ultra-violent anti-semitism is the in thing this year. HarperCollins is buying it... (No offence to the randomly named publisher intended!)

*At what age did you first begin to feel the need to write fiction and what was it that drew you to science fiction?*

I didn't start off by writing, I started off by telling stories. My father told us children stories, my older sister took over, in time the mantle was passed on to me. The science fiction

came from my mother, who read a lot of it so the books were there for me to pick up and I did. But she wasn't a fan, as such. So I had an introduction to sf as just an ordinary kind of book that your mother might read, no different from a historical romance or a thriller. Consequently, I was bemused when I later met the idea that an appetite for sf is a secret, deviant thing: and equally bemused by the idea that sf is a specially brainless and repellent form of entertainment... But when did I start consciously *writing*, on my own time? I can't remember. Probably when I was about twelve.

*Your novels have a complexity which either serves to mystify the reader or to interest them, depending on the reader. Do you yourself perceive these complexities, or do you believe your work is fashioned from window-pane prose?*



Yes, I perceive the complexities. It is a very good thing for me that I have the Ann Halam books as an outlet, in which I can write stories in something approaching what (or at least what I think you mean by this) you call window-pane prose. The ideal is to write the big story to its full complexity, and yet still make the delivery perfectly simple. The best, the *very best* popular science writers are the ones who achieve this. I'd name names, only it would be invidious. I'm still trying. It's something to do with intuition. When you know how something works so well that you can handle it as "intuitively" as walking or breathing, then you can write the window-pane prose. But I'm always trying to learn something new (new to me anyway); or understand something complicated. You see the problem.

*You seem to be having a love affair with acronyms, almost amounting to a grand obsession, which is evident in most of your novels but especially Escape Plans which sported a glossary of them at the rear. Does this come from a love of ciphers (which would partly explain the complex nature of your novels) or from some other source?*

Nope. There's nothing in it. In *Escape Plans*, the acronymic language is a direct result of the reading I did around the USA space programme, which was stuffed with acronyms (still is). I'm not particularly interested in them myself. If they turn up in other books it's only because they turn up in everyday life, some of them extremely dippy and strained in order to get an appropriate word out of it.

*You have travelled extensively, especially in the Far East, and have used eastern backgrounds and cultures in your novels. Do you think you'd be the same sort of writer – a science-fiction*

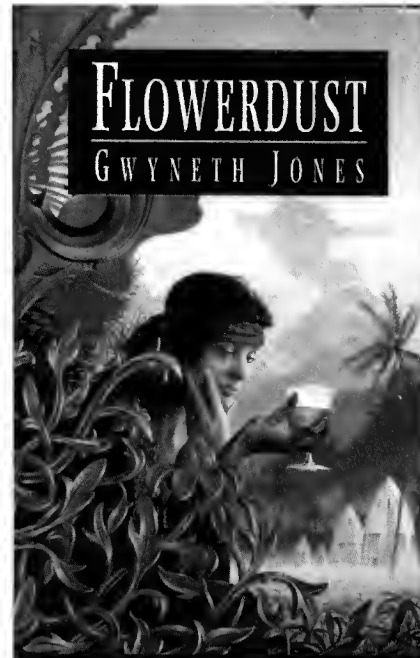
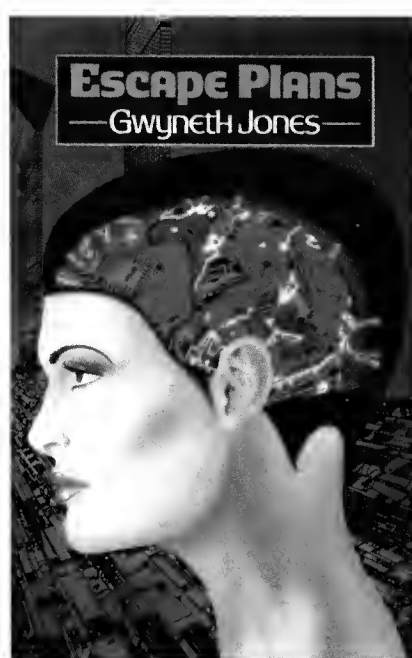
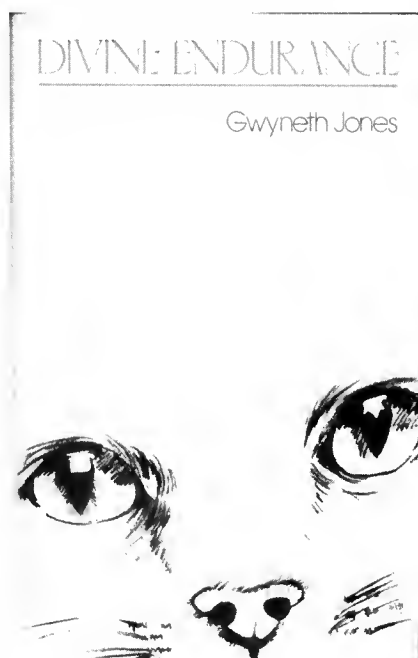
*Arguably, I could  
have done all  
my research  
flying a desk.*

*Many sf writers do.*

*and fantasy author – if you had not spent so much time abroad. How has it affected your craft as a writer.*

I spent three years living in the tropics, at the beginning of my writing career, because my husband took a job at the United World College of South East Asia. (if he hadn't got that job, I was going to apply for the Hong Kong Police Force. We were determined to head off *somewhere*) While we were there we travelled around the region: Indonesia, Peninsula Malaysia, East Malaysia (meaning Borneo), Thailand, India. When we got back to England in 1980 the kind of travelling we'd done was pretty unusual. Since then, we've made some more fairly adventurous trips. But long haul independent travel has become such a mass market phenomenon I no longer feel I've travelled "very extensively." and Java, the place that affected me first and most, is no longer a romantic exotic backwater! I do feel I've been

part of a cultural movement, and witnessed some interesting history along the way. When we arrived in Singapore, newbies to the World College were given a standard orientation tour, conducted by a leathery old British-Singaporean bloke, looked like a giant tortoise in tropical kit instead of a shell, who told us in *20 Years Time This Region Will Be Where the Future is Happening!* And we believed him, and he was right. (He didn't mention the current economic meltdown, but that's capitalism for you, boom and bust, it's a pattern that seems inescapable.) Would I still be the same sort of writer if I'd stayed at home? Well, I've written often about the urban tropics, and about the experience of being a "rich" tourist, rubbernecking among the dispossessed. The Ramayana – which I first met in the "Ramayana Ballet" in Java – still turns up in my books, to show how the past and the future are bound together... The Ramayana epic has been around for thousands of years and is still endemic in religion, art and entertainment, from India to Korea (much like Christian iconography in Europe). The evidence of cultural imprinting is there. But the stories that started me off as an sf/fantasy writer were written years before I went to Singapore. Even my "Singapore" novel, *Divine Endurance*, which was first written while I was there, had existed for years before I went east, in the form of a story about a cat and a princess who is really a doll, already set in the mysterious orient. Arguably, I could have done all my research flying a desk. Many sf writers do. Since I'm the method-acting kind, it was good luck to hit Singapore and that region when I did. Ten years later, Eastern Europe would have been the place to be. Now, I suppose we might as well





stay at home, the world has been shrinking so rapidly. The urban tropics may come and find us the way things are going. And as for the Ramayana, they celebrate Divali (Hindu festival of Light, which commemorates the return of Rama and Sita in triumph at the end of the story) at my son's primary school, I've seen them do the monkey-battle episode as a shadow puppet show.

*White Queen is probably my favourite novel of yours to date, with such brilliant throwaway lines as in a country where everything good is always in the past, it's the poor who make fashion." This novel, and the other two Aleutian books, and indeed certain short stories I've read of yours at workshops, have more than a tinge of James Tiptree Jr about them. Were you influenced at all by her?*

No, I don't think I was influenced directly by Tiptree. I think her influence would lead you much more towards the cyberpunks, in fact I think she had a considerable unsung influence on them: which is maybe why you mention *White Queen*, which is the nearest I've come to a cyberpunk novel. I find the mood of some of the Tiptree stories too do laden and solemn for my taste. I'm a milder writer, more in touch with the European traditions; and though it may seem to you that I'm obsessed with the Great Mystery Of Sex, I rarely take that subject as seriously as Tiptree did. I think Ursula Le Guin had a strong early influence on me. And the Inklings fantasists Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, and George MacDonald. When it comes to the more recent past, it is harder to say. Absolutely everything I read or watch or listen to, fiction or non-fiction, has something in it I can use (or abuse), but I don't think I'm so open to "influence."

*Like many female sf (and some fan-*

*tasy writers) you are a feminist. Has your cause advanced as rapidly as you wish, or do you feel there is a long way to go? How do you see that cause best advanced further in the kind of fiction you write?*

If the net effect of the French Revolution is still in doubt, it's definitely too soon to tell on this one. The idea that women should have the same human rights as men is still regarded as completely outrageous in many parts of the world. The problems are horrendous, sickening, and if anything getting worse, not better as what we call the Developing World gets urbanized. Meanwhile in a society like ours in the UK we've started hearing that girls are getting ahead of boys at school, even in the traditional exclusively boys'-own subjects, and that women are getting more and more of the high-powered jobs while men are suffering a crisis of confidence. If you believe all the scare stories, we're either heading for a brave new world of Female Supremacy, or else there's going to be a savage backlash, with the men violently reasserting their supremacy. I don't like the sound of either of those options. But can we reach a stable, enduring state of equality between the sexes, with fair shares of the goods and the work; and where men don't dominate women, or women dominate men, at least not more than is fun for everyone? I think it can only happen if both men and women are prepared to see an erosion of the differences, a considerable blurring of sexual roles and privileges. Sometimes I'm hopeful, sometimes not. Wait and see. As for the second part of your question, I don't see the fiction I write as furthering the cause. It's more like the other way round. Referring back to your questions 2 and 3, it would be strange if someone of my views in

private life took a different attitude in my novels. Maybe I could write man-hating or misogynist bestsellers under an assumed name. Maybe I do!

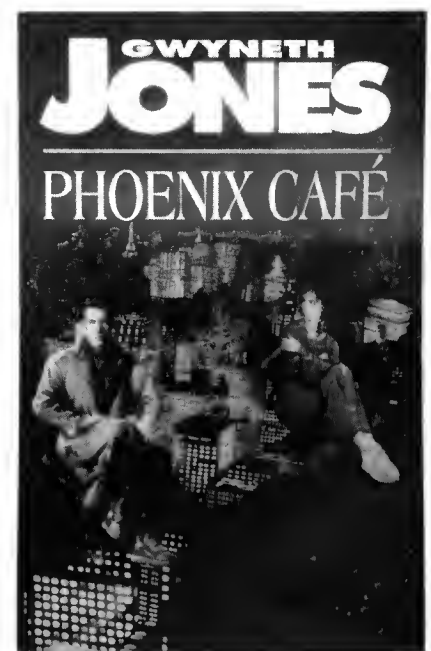
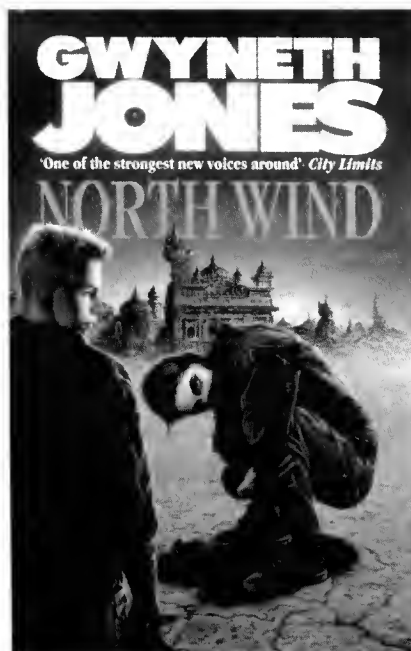
*Did motherhood slow down your literary output? Did it deepen your perspectives? Did it affect your work at all?*

Motherhood? No, it didn't slow me down, not at the time. I worked like a demon throughout my pregnancy and throughout my son's infancy. I loved being a parent but I was determined not to give up any of my former life. It was utterly exhausting but I looked on the challenge of keeping everything together as an exhilarating game. But that's me, not motherhood. Actually, motherhood slows me down a lot more now, when there's nothing specially female about my role: what with the karate classes and the music practice and the football games, and the art club, all requiring one of other of the child's parents to ferry him to and fro and/or cheer on the sidelines. Did fatherhood deepen your perspectives? I bet it did.

*What kind of writer do you see yourself as? A stylist? A reporter? A storyteller?*

All of the above! But if I picked one it would have to be stylist because that's where I spend most of my efforts, for better or worse. I make up my stories very rapidly, once I've got the general idea. I do think of myself as a reporter of my times, but I don't waste a lot of hours on journalism-type research.. what I see is what you get. But I can go on tinkering with a sentence forever, trying to get the cadence exactly right. It's ridiculous really. Quite often at the end of it all even I can barely tell the difference between the first draft and the last.

*You won the James Tiptree Award in 1991 for White Queen, the Dracula Society's "Children of the Night"*





award in 1995 for *The Fear Man*, and have since picked up two World Fantasy Awards for your short stories, all well deserved in my opinion. What kind of value do you place on awards and prizes? Have they affected your career in any way or do you see them more as personal confidence boosters?

In my case, I'd say it was mostly personal confidence boosters, though I do believe that winning the Tiptree award had a good effect on the career of *White Queen* in the USA. Getting an award is nice, but I think it's best not to feel too pleased with yourself. Whether the voters vote or the judges judge, the truly exceptional book doesn't always get the prize. This fact is so universally acknowledged and endlessly discussed, in the whole field of literary awards, that you have to realize that you yourself might be the compromise candidate this time, or your book was the mediocrity that didn't offend anybody; or your prize is this year's proof that the voters have terrible taste. Or maybe the real winner somehow disqualified themselves at the last moment, and someone just pulled your name out of a hat.

Your latest novel is *Phoenix Café*, the third in the Aleutian colonialist novels, which are all rich in characters. I especially love Catherine who, it seems to me, has a lot of Gwyneth Jones in her. However, I sense a certain awkwardness about getting across the alienness of the aliens and their culture – eg, you tell the reader straight out the ways in which they use their body movements, odours etc as a fundamental language. As a storyteller do you find world-building a difficult exercise?

You think I'm like Catherine. Hmm. Don't quite know how to take that...

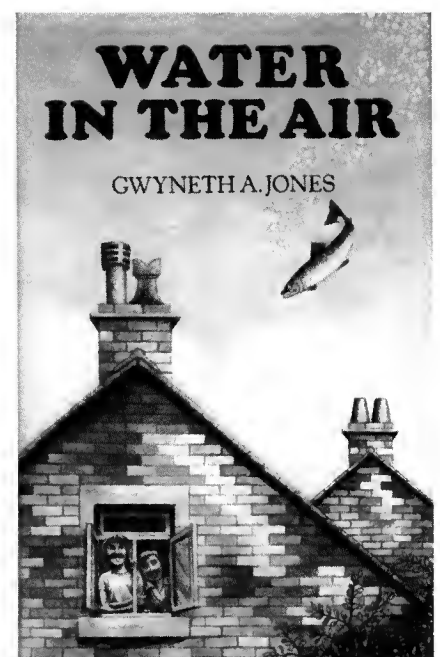
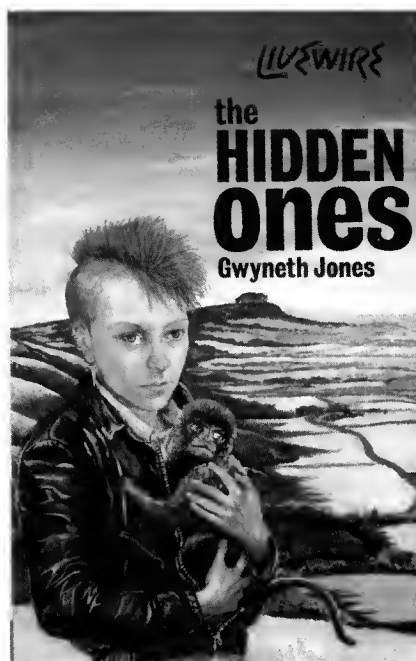
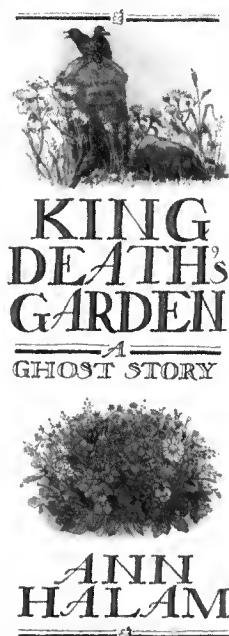
...whatever role  
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Aliens are other people. Whatever they look like, whatever role they play, sentient aliens (I exclude, though with reservations, burning funguses etc) are really human beings in disguise. You're a science-fiction writer, I don't have to tell you that. When I was inventing my Aleutians, I gave them traits derived from my science reading in human psychology, physiology, genetics. all about pheromones, and body language, and the continuity between different forms of life on earth, and the value of sexual function. I wanted to make them seem bewilderingly alien, and then gradually show that they were strangely like us. But that was back in 1988. *Phoenix Café* is a very different book from *White Queen*. It's supposed to be set 300 years in the future, instead of being a near-future extrapolation. I felt I was writing something between a modern novel (and I mean modern, not post-modern: one of those end of empire

novels, by Olivia Manning or the *Jewel in the Crown* bloke, Scott, whose first name I forget) and a historical romance. Fantastical exaggeration of our contemporary technology was okay, but sf realism of the *White Queen* kind was out of place. Besides which, in the last ten years my "Aleutian" ideas have become much more widely discussed, in sf and outside it. Lifestyle magazines are now full of chat about how most of our communication is non-verbal, and shocking stories like humans are genetically related to yeast! So, one way and another there was no point in making an artful mystery about the Aleutians' "alien" traits, and yet readers, especially new readers, did need to know. In the end I decided just to hand over the information and get on with the story. It's sometimes the best option. No, I don't find world building a difficult exercise. I never bother with it much. The way I see it, you could slave for years to construct a fully rounded fictional cosmos and you'd still be doing the equivalent of putting on *King Lear* with a stage set consisting of a bedsheet and a kitchen chair. Your story, which is the product of a real world, with all its immeasurable complexities, is much the realest thing in the book, so to speak. You should let it be your guide. So I set things up the way they have to be for my plot to happen, and then I let the rest of the fictional world accrete around that skeleton structure more or less by chance.

Can you live comfortably on the money you earn at your writing?

Well, yes I can. Even though I spend far too much time doing very impractical, non-paying things that I enjoy, like serious reviews, and writing papers for conferences. And taking long holidays. But don't try this at home, children. because I have a hus-





band in a paying job, I write an Ann Halam book a year as well as working on the current Gwyneth Jones project, and I earn my pocket money by doing school visits, writer's circles, even the occasional short story. I suppose it also depends on what you mean by comfortable. I don't want to be rich. I would not like it. a frugal sufficiency is fine. But maybe, if the state crept up on me gradually, I might get used to it...

*Where do you see yourself going in your future writing? Will you stay mainly in hard sf, or will you move into other genres? Do you actually have some overall plan for your work.*

I think I'm going to keep on the way I'm going. I'm currently writing a book that's taking ages (this is the Gwyneth Jones project), partly because I keep allowing it to be interrupted (see above); and partly because it's a new departure, after a decade spent working on the Aleutians. I have two further books in mind for Gwyneth Jones, cut and ready to sew, and another in a more nebulous state. and that takes me through the foreseeable future. With Ann Halam, I'm not sure, except that after the one I write this year (the book after the one that's coming out in May '98) I want a change from ghost stories. And I'd like to write some more short stories. I don't have an overall plan, far from it. I do see my work as developing organically – like a big piece of software, or a painter's or a music composer's work. I see branchings and connections, I see myself using the same themes over and over again in different ways. I see a little phrase or a tune reappearing in different guises, elaborated or stripped down, in different pieces (like the Ramayana references; or the "rich tourist confronted by poverty") I think after a while you

develop your own iconography, and it's a good thing to notice this personal vocabulary building up, and make conscious use of it.

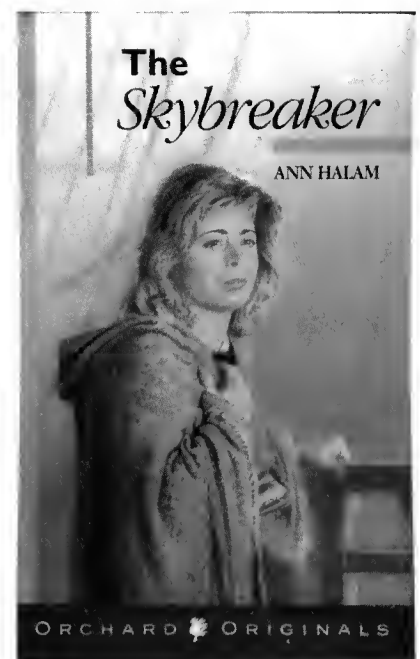
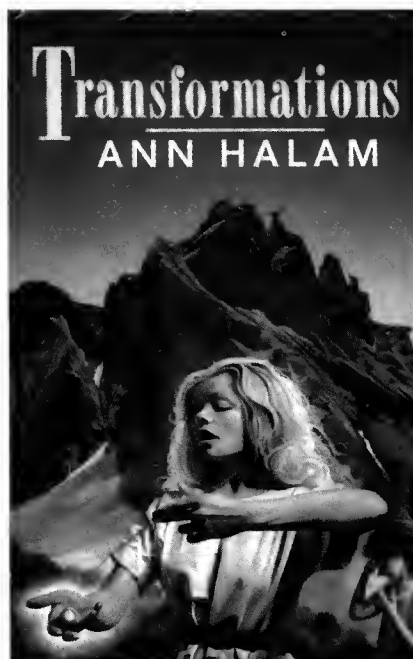
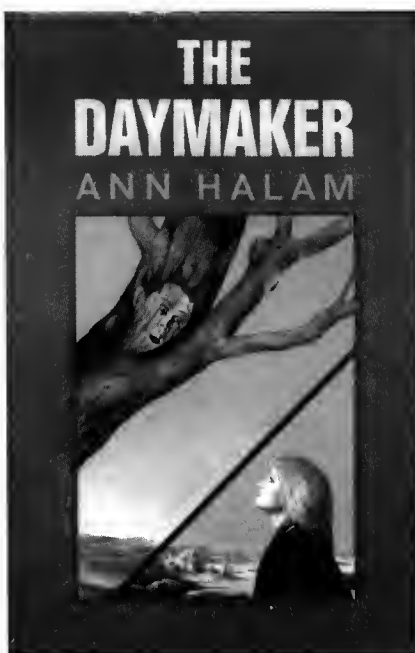
*You are a critic and a reviewer, and write many articles on various subjects. As both a writer and a critic how do bad and good reviews of your own work affect you? Presumably you feel that critics/reviewers are necessary people?*

I like getting good reviews, I don't like getting bad ones. Though occasionally a bad review can entertain me, if it's funny. A really stinking review can be the basis for a lifelong friendship, if critic and author happen to share a sense of humour. As both a writer and a critic, I possibly find it easier to take the bad reviews, because I've slated plenty of other people's books in my time. Are critics/reviewers necessary people? I don't know about *necessary*. Are novelists necessary people? Most reviewing is a little bit dishonest. The punters aren't getting exactly what they're supposed to be getting, that is, an unprejudiced opinion. An editor will straight-out instruct you to give a certain book an easy ride, or maybe you simply know that this magazine expects only positive reviews, so that's what you provide (this is a form of advertising, after all). Or you may disapprove of a book's politics, but you don't want your criticism to be dismissed as biased, so you find fault with it in other ways. Or you're giving a boost to a friend. All these things happen, and sometimes worse. In a small world like sf, one may hope that most people have the sense to read between the lines. But there are also really great reviews, witty and wise and genuinely informative, a pleasure to read even if you've never heard of the book... I think story-

telling of all kinds, and print fiction, and literary criticism, are all parts of the same edifice, or organism. I think it would be strange if the writing and reading of fiction were to be carried on in complete silence, as it were: like a football match on the tv with no commentary. People discuss what they've read, if only with themselves. People make judgements, expert or not. Some of this discussion gets published, that seems right to me. It's an imperfect business: but then, so is writing fiction.

*Moving on to your children's books, who is Ann Halam? Where does she come from? Is she the child within you, or simply a pseudonym?*

The first book I had published was a children's novel called *Water in the Air*. That was with Macmillan, many years ago. The second book I wrote for Marni Hodgkin, the children's books editor, she didn't like at all. It was far too frivolous, a fantasy adventure with no "issues" angle. I asked (I was completely ignorant of my rights or reasonable expectations) could I try to get it published elsewhere. She asked me to use a pseudonym, and reserve "Gwyneth Jones" for the Macmillan books. I agreed to that, I didn't see why not. For a while I was writing fantasies as Ann Halam and supposedly more serious children's books, with less fantasy, as Gwyneth Jones. Eventually I stopped writing juvenile fiction for Macmillan, and did an sf novel for adults as Gwyneth Jones, and that was how the split came about. Sometimes I feel as if writing Ann Halam books, and the necessary corollary of working in schools for a few days every term – you have to keep in touch with the audience – is my day job. and that I'm lucky to be paid for doing something challenging that I thoroughly enjoy. Sometimes I fret at the restrictions





imposed by the teenage market, or at least by the publishers' perception of the teenage market. Sometimes I fret at the way people regard writing for children as girly and second-rate (even worse than writing sf!). But when it comes down to it, I think teenagers are important. I value their company, I enjoy working with them (even at the risk of finding myself trapped in the drama room alone with 120 year nines from hell, last thing on a Friday afternoon). Maybe Ann Halam is the teacher within me. I would have made a dreadful classroom teacher, it isn't in my nature: too much like hard work. But my mother was a teacher, my husband's a teacher, I'm drawn to that atmosphere. There is a need to pass on the flame, or something.

*What do you see as the essential difference between your children's novels and your books for elders?*

Essentially, there isn't much in it. The same ideas and themes crop up in both (though this may not always be obvious) The Jones books and the Halam books definitely feed off each other. Maybe you could say the Ann Halam books are focused on the past, including my own past as a teenager, but up to and including the present day, and the Gwyneth Jones sf books are focused on the future (curiously enough). Promethean fiction versus Epimethean fiction, change versus tradition, the bare rock and the vulture for Gwyneth Jones, the box of troubles for Ann Halam. But it's just word play. The Ann Halam books are shorter and less complicated, that's the facts.

*My all-time favourite of your children's books is King Death's Garden – and once a favourite has been established it's hard to dislodge it with future works because (perhaps falsely) a rosy glow surrounds it –*

## The Jones books and the Halam books definitely feed off each other.

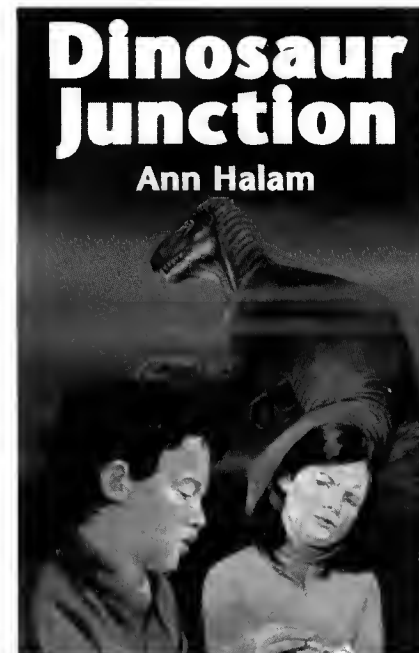
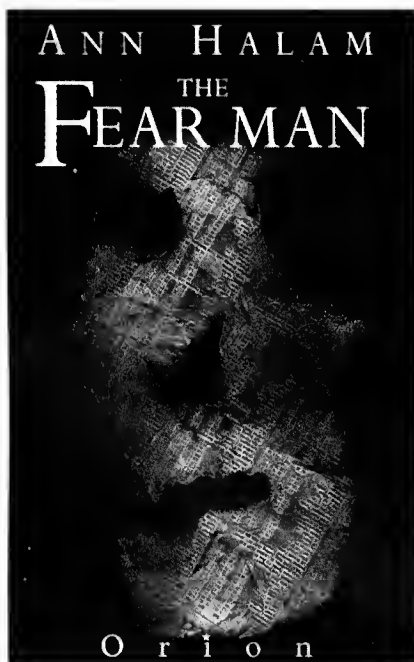
*and for my money it should have swept the awards. Maurice, your main protagonist, is a character I would put on a par with Kipling's Kim. Where to the influences for this novel come from? I see A Midsummer Night's Dream in there, and various other works, but are they subconscious or intentional?*

I think you're right to value *King Death's Garden*, because it was another of my transitional books, like *White Queen* or *Divine Endurance* – a new initiative, major shift, great leap forward, whatever. Books like that are more concentrated, richer, more goes into them (not least, more time). I can obviously only tell you about the influences that I'm aware of. There was the house, for one thing, the house by the cemetery, which hasn't changed for 40 years. That was a real place (still is, of course). It was the house we bought when we came back from Singapore. And the cemetery,

*King Death's Garden* itself, which you have visited. Maurice's health problems were based on my own sickly childhood, the white nights staring at the ceiling, waiting for morning. Moth the fairy is a direct quote from *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Sue Townsend's *The Diary of Adrian Mole* is in there, I'm sure, and of course the ghost stories of M. R. James, especially I think one called "The View From a Hill." I am very fond of M. R. James's prosy, ruminative ghost stories. Also Sheridan Le Fanu, and Arthur Machen, and others of that era. I wish I could find more modern ghost stories that I liked.

*What is your preferred reading?*

I have three big books that I keep by my bed and read successively, over and over again. *Gravity's Rainbow*, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu. I started doing this about ten years ago, I intend to go on until I die. I'm about a third of the way through *Genji* at the moment. It takes me a long time to get through one of the big three, however, because I read plenty of other things as well. I read *New Scientist* every week, from cover to cover. I read whatever is relevant to the book I'm working on; I read thrillers, and I read French novels, usually 19th century but I'll try anything. I can read French fluently enough to get a kick out of this, while having to struggle enough to make it interesting. At the moment I'm reading Lamartine's *Raphael* (wet as a haddock's bathing suit, but fascinating). And I just finished reading a biography of Balzac, so I'm reading some early Balzac too, to check it out. But in translation, to save time. At the moment I'm reading a story called "The Girl With The Golden Eyes." IZ





# Code of the Skydiver

*Ian Stewart & Jack Cohen*

The cities were feeding.

Deep beneath the striped orange-brown canopy of Secondhome's gas-giant atmosphere they cruised, sucking up aeroplankton by the billion.

Halfholder from the Violent Foam awoke from shallow torpor and sniffed the air nervously.

It was time. Time to strike a fatal blow against the Elders' unthinking destruction of the lesser worlds – destruction born of needless fears, withered lifesouls, and mindless adherence to the mundane and the ephemeral.

The rippling of her leathery hide sent wild shivers spiralling along her neural core as the excitement built. In an effort to remain calm she worked through her checklist, deliberately confirming each item twice, making sure that her beltbag contained all the vital equipment prescribed by her advisers...

The Carrier was sealed in a pouch, for safety.

She brought her prompter up to her eyes, and the shivers became unbearable. *It is time.* She could scarcely believe that the long wait was over.

A brief squirt of release hormone peeled back the blisterpond's roof like an eyelid surprised by morning, and Halfholder floated cautiously upwards, until her ring of eight oval eyes cleared the sunken rim.

She spun gently in an i-spy.

As she had expected, the streets here, within sight of the Edge, were devoid of fellow blimps. No guardians, no watchers. To one side the city's barrier fringemass swayed ominously, a deadly, moving forest. Wisps of floating plant life drifted past, then denser bunches, some possibly hiding predators. She bobbed back into the blisterpond, alarmed by a shoal of porca that swept past in line-astern, bumping into each other and wallowing awkwardly in the vortices shed by the city's trailing edges. Foolish to react to such timid creatures... even more foolish not to.

Soon Halfholder would have to negotiate those vortices, thread the dangers of the fringemass, and brave the freedom of the winds. She would deploy the specially cast Carrier that she carried for safety in a reinforced pouch, bringing horror to her Elders and honour to her cause. Her gas sacs tightened in anxiety. To relax them, she reached into the pouch and brought out the Carrier, revelling in the feel of its rough metallic surfaces, passing it from tentacle to tentacle to bring its nodule-covered shell

within range of her sharpest eye. Pride flared in her breathing-tubes – the tiny semi-living machine had been a valid construct, the most valid yet of any casting.

Her current position was towards the left side of the trailing edge of the city known as Sparkling Spires of the Colder Deep. Nineteen miles below and 160 to leeward, deep in Secondhome's southern tropospheric current, drifted the drop-zone city – Whispering Volve of Late Morning. Her prompter informed Halfholder that there were no new changes to the drop-zone's flight plan. Still steady, level flight. Sudden changes in altitude were the worst – she had enough lift capacity to cope with normal variations in direction. It looked as if she was going to be lucky.

Nervous beyond all precedent, now that the moment had come, Halfholder hesitated, continuing to scan the deserted streets for the slightest sign of motion. What she was about to do was contrary to age-old law: if she was caught, the penalty would be ritual deflation.

A flicker of movement caught her fourth-to-sixth eyes, and she tensed – but it was only a sub-sentient cycler, snuffling aimlessly along a side street in search of waste. There was no prospect of that, not so near the Edge, but the ancient routines remained true to their evolutionary programs, unaware of the Elders' growing reluctance to change the old ways. The cycler's ridged wheels made a mechanical clicking sound as it rolled across the living scaly surface of the floating city. With relief she saw that it had no gravitics and no pseudo-eye. Harmless. Nevertheless, she took refuge in the shadow of the dome's lip until the cycler had potted away behind a cluster of dormant buildings.

The fringemass shimmered in the city's turbulent wash... beckoning, threatening – promising.

Halfholder secured her beltbag more tightly, excreted a touch more liftgas into her buoyancy bubbles, and floated free of the dome.

Each of Secondhome's million cities had been grown on a base of neutrally buoyant foam, made from living bubbles a few microns across – biological cells with their own genetics and their own specialist organelles. Prominent among the latter were levispheres – tiny membrane-walled bubbles of almost pure gaseous hydrogen, which provided lift. The cells' production of



levispheres was sensitive to pressure differences, and a feedback mechanism had evolved that maintained neutral buoyancy. The foam was a vast colony-creature, which had grown over the millennia until it formed an irregular slab hundreds of miles across, and between one and five miles thick.

The slab's upper surface, unadorned, would have been flat. Instead, it had been decorated with the superstructure of the city, coaxed from the firm foundation by the chemical attentions of countless generations of blimps.

Its lower surface was a seemingly endless jungle of suspended tendrils, like a giant jellyfish. Near the edges of the foam slab the tendrils spread sideways to form a monstrous fringemass, which rippled unpredictably in the turbulent Secondhome weather. Further in, the tendrils were closer to the vertical – becoming longer as their roots neared the slab's centre, where its component cells were oldest. Here many tendrils had grown to a length of more than 50 miles. Like the rest of the slab, they were neutrally buoyant, and they had yet to reach their full length.

Around the city swarmed a fine haze of aeroplankton, trillions upon trillions of airborne microorganisms. Each of the slab's tendrils was a specialist trap, evolved to lure specific categories of aeroplankton into more or less elaborate forms of suicide. Some tendrils were sticky. Some fired tiny harpoons towards any source of pheromones to which they were sensitive, and reeled in their catch. Some sucked the heavy atmosphere through cavernous baleen-like filters, while tiny scuttlepods clambered over the fibrous drapery and scraped the catch into irised pouches. In return, a ring of enlarged pores around the lips of the pouches oozed an energy-rich sludge, at which the scuttlepods occasionally licked. Other tendrils generated focused pulses of ultrasound, spread chemical lures, filled the surrounding air with tiny semi-autonomous homing webs, or merely waited for prey to blunder into sprung traps.

Once they had secured their prey, however, nearly all of the tendrils treated it in the same manner. First they dissolved its membranes, releasing the embedded levispheres. Most of these escaped into the atmosphere, where they were degraded by heat and pressure, recycling their hydrogen. The rest were used to fine-tune the local neutral buoyancy. The nutrients that had been released when the membranes dissolved were transported through a fractal tree of molecular nanotubes, dragged upwards by stepper viruses which climbed the nanotubes like a mountaineer in a rock chimney. As the viruses climbed higher, the trickle of rising nutrients became a torrent, then a flood, pouring into clusters of slimy spherical sacs that festooned the slab's underside, dangling between the swelling roots of the suspended tendrils. Here the stepper viruses were released, falling through Secondhome's atmosphere in an infinitely slow drizzle of genetic add-ons, to re-infect any tendrils that they chanced to encounter.

The blimps that lived on the slab's upper surface were seldom conscious of the aeroplanktonic armageddon that went on just below them, as it had done every day for half a billion years. Mostly they just accepted one of its minor side-effects, the creation of enormous floating platforms: the bedrock, so to speak, upon which their civilization was founded. Only when a city slab

became sick were the veterinary squadrons and air gardeners activated, to descend into the hidden depths and effect whatever cures were necessary.

The blimps had evolved in a hydrogen ecology. They, like many lesser creatures of their world, were balloons: they, alone, were thinking balloons. Some balloonist organisms, like the slab, were made from microscopic levisphere-rich cells. Others had larger hydrogen-filled organs to maintain neutral buoyancy. The city-builders and their ilk did not so much fly as swim in the compressed Secondhome air.

For a hundred million years, the city slabs had circulated, deep within Secondhome's striped envelope. Some of the senior blimps still remembered the busy years of migration and colonisation. A select few remembered what had gone before, and devoted their interminable lives to ensuring its continuation.

Some of the junior blimps, however, had a very different agenda.

### *Snowstrike.*

The very word triggered an atavistic fear in the blimps. Snowstrike had devastated Firsthome, until they had struggled their way to the secret physics that let them manipulate gravity. Then snowstrike indirectly destroyed Firsthome's star, when they failed to appreciate the hidden dangers of the technology that their discovery unleashed.

On Secondhome's fourth major moon, a sentinel symbiaut making routine observations noticed a significant deviation in the Outer Halo. Soon the diagnosis became unavoidable. Snowstone.

Time meant nothing to the symbiauts. They tagged the snowstone for easy identification and watched its tedious, erratic detachment from its myriad companions. They extrapolated its long fall towards the sun, computed collision probabilities, and weighed possible actions against their consequences.

Probabilities crystallized into certainties. Contingencies collapsed into compulsions. The decision, once taken, was acted upon immediately. In shallow graves beneath the crusts of the four major moons, squads of symbiauts swarmed over dormant gravitic repulsors, awakening them from their long slumber. The moons reconfigured their orbits to receive the incoming snowstone, inexorably pulling it into a precise embrace before hurling it violently away from the great gas giant. Acting under an ancient compulsion, they chose a trajectory that neither terminated in the system's sun nor risked a subsequent repeat encounter.

The snowstone's crust melted in the heat of the sun, and began to boil. A vast plume jetted outwards on the solar wind.

The chloride oceans of Poisonblue beckoned, a tempting target.

Deep beneath Secondhome's belted atmosphere, those of the Elders that were currently revived from estivation received news of the snowstone's discovery, anticipated impact, successful deflection, and explosive end. Congratulating themselves on their foresight, they resumed their interminable cycles of politics, reproduction, and estivation.

Poisonblue briefly became an ominous grey.

On Secondhome, only the symbiauts noticed.



It was the rumours that first attracted her – the quiet, excited whispers, the hooded glances. There were pheromones of intrigue in the air, concentrating in unlikely corners, tantalizing her jaded, cloistered senses.

Cautiously she asked indirect questions, their meaning hidden under layers of metaphor. She began to frequent disreputable quarters of the city, until her patient search paid off. It was true. The forbidden sport had been revived – illicit, delicious.

Skydiving.

Free fall between cities, plunging without restraint through the untamed skies, prohibited because of ancient abuses and the Elders' pathological fear of personal danger. The penalties were severe – permanent monitoring, restricted estivation rights, recalcitrance tattoos. But the rewards outweighed them, for Halfholder craved excitement, and skydiving offered that and more – intense and undiluted. And there was a political dimension that proved even more irresistible. The skydivers were actively trying to further the policy of benign neglect. No longer would snowstones rain down upon the innocent faces of the lesser worlds.

It appealed to her sense of cosmic unity.

She climbed the ranks – first neophyte, then novice. She trained, in secret, and rose to initiate-designate. And what an initiation it was to be! Only one dive in 10,000 amounted to more than symbolic defiance. But the Instrumentality had taken note of her unusual political commitment, and had blessed her with high honour.

Her initiation would further the Cause by direct action.

At first even Halfholder was racked with doubt. The action demanded seemed too extreme, a crime that went far beyond harmless insubordination. The effectuators of the Instrumentality became more ardent, more persuasive. *The Elders are weak and lazy. Strike but once, and they will fall.* Charmed, flattered, aroused, entranced, bewildered, she became a willing accessory to her own moral seduction. To experience the ecstasy of skydiving, she would risk all. She had never wanted anything so much in her entire life. She existed in a suppressed frenzy of anticipation, intoxicated beyond endurance by the prospect of ultimate freedom.

The effectuators promised her an emotional experience beyond all imagination. They promised that her actions would be celebrated forever in ritual song.

She believed them.

The scaly flatness of the city slab fell away beneath her. Halfholder rocked in the freshening winds, near-paralysed by terror. A random eddy caught her. In a burst of manic energy she fought against it. This was a time to fly low, not yet a time to soar.

With an effort, she trailed her tentacles, locked their brace-ring muscles rigid with a quick, instinctive pressure-grip, and exhaled a small quantity of liftgas. Her sensitive tips brushed the outermost fronds of the barrier, only to blunder immediately into a wild flurry of vortex filaments. Cursing herself for making so elementary an error despite all her training, Halfholder tumbled end over end, crashing through the feathery strands of airweed, ripping branches out so that dark, rubbery sap began to well from the severed roots, plunging out of control *between* a dozen pulsating trunks, any of which could have ruptured her braincase

with its terrible spines. Before she could feel the fear, she was free, buffeted by the city's wash.

The fringemass loomed. She caught a quick glimpse of the flailing tendrils at the city's stern, each as thick as a large building and as long as Main Avenue, propelling it faster than the ever-present current, but in the same general direction. Only then, when she was comparatively safe, did the fear hit her – and she found herself floundering, close to panic.

She was saved by a flock of rippling pancake birds, which scattered in alarm at the unprecedented intruder as she flopped, out of control, from one rubbery disc to another. The humour of the situation swept the fear away. As the shy creatures slopped clumsily to right and left, she emitted a high-pitched whistle. At once the birds shot skywards, as they always did when panicked. Then Halfholder from the Violent Foam remembered her training, excreted a large bubble of liftgas, and *fell*.

Suddenly, wilder than she had ever imagined, the rush hit her, and she was wheeling through Secondhome's thick atmosphere, riding the thermals, swerving to right and left, finally *free*. Free of care, free of hope, free of any emotion save the delicious joy of being at one with the air and the planet.

Now, she felt *right* to the core of her lifesoul. She *knew*, beyond any shadow of any doubt, that the Elders were wrong. Too long in control, they had allowed their analytical faculties to swamp their respect for cosmic wisdom. Too hidebound, their rigid minds were unable to encompass the utter *strangeness* of the universe, of its multitude of beings – some so unimaginable that even she, Halfholder from the Violent Foam, at one with the Lifesoul Cherisher, could not fathom them. Too tentative, too frightened, so that for tens of millions of years the Elders had pursued their insane bombardment of every nearby solid body – tiny Meltworld, shrouded Acidglobe, the double planets Poisonblue and Little Rock, enigmatic Reddust, the Ringed Giant, the distant Outworlds... It was warfare on a cosmic scale, waged against the innocent – a perversion of the artistry of the Lifesoul Cherisher.

It was wrong.

However, the error was understandable. Firsthome had suffered the terrors of snowstrike. The Elders had learned to control it – and had belatedly learned the error of redirecting incoming snowstones at their own star. This apparently harmless act, continued over a billion years, had altered the balance of stellar reactions by seeding them with exotic nuclei.

Their defence of Firsthome had caused its star to go nova. Only the dismal exodus to Secondhome had saved them – but at a terrible cost.

So, when Secondhome's gravitic deflectors were being installed on its four major moons, the Elders adopted a different strategy. There were two choices. One was to redirect the snowstones into random orbits. But blimp technology could only divert the snowstones: there was no way to impart sufficient energy to fling them out of the system altogether. Eventually, then, they must return, to be diverted again. And one day, perhaps, a snowstone would arrive when the deflectors had temporarily failed, and snowstrike would devastate the planet like a fusion holocaust.

Which left only the second option: redirect the snow-



stones to impact the lesser worlds.

The Elders had convinced themselves that this was the only safe course. It would be vandalism on a cosmic scale, leaving those worlds scarred and unable ever to support life – but that was a small price to pay, and in any case none of them, save perhaps Ringed Giant, possessed life-sustaining atmospheres.

The skydivers took a different view, the policy of benign neglect. The lesser worlds, lifeless as they must be, danced to the rhythms of the Lifesoul Cherisher. Their artistry deserved respect, not cosmic vandalism. And there was more. Terrified by even the faintest prospect of snowstrike, the Elders had robbed their own ecosystem of its most precious tutor – the random hand of chaos. For – so the skydivers believed – the cities *needed* the devastation of snowstrike, of occasional massive impacts in the upper atmosphere, to disturb the planetary ecosystem and favour the growth of diversity.

Halfholder suddenly saw just how strange the universe could be. Why, even now, even in the corrosive nitrox atmosphere of Poisonblue, there *might* be some rudimentary form of pseudolife, struggling to maintain a precarious existence against all the chemical odds... In her near madness she imagined exotic collections of tightly knit molecules, perhaps so improbably designed that they actually made *use* of the poison to power their alien metabolism. Over aeons, those molecules might evolve into huge, lumbering creatures, staggering across the hot rock, sloshing feebly in the raging oceans...

Her rational self would have rejected such thoughts instantly, for they were against all the teaching, all the accumulated knowledge of her species. But here, soaring unencumbered on the primal winds of Secondhome, her mind broke through its accustomed bounds, and began to imagine not just the improbable, but the blatantly impossible. For in such a state of mind, *nothing* could be impossible.

Why, even the overthrow of the Elders was conceivable. And with it, the first, tentative steps towards the salvation of this wrecked, maltreated solar system.

And the resumed evolution of the floating cities, and the start of the long path back to spiritual health and genetic renewal. Even as the Elders protected their world, they were slowly bringing about its ruination.

They had to be stopped.

Blimps resembled half-inflated balloons. At the top was a domed gasbag with pliant, leathery skin. Along the dome's equator was the main sensory organ – a ring of six sound-sensitive patches, placed alternately above and below the midline, which together synthesized a three-dimensional image of the blimp's immediate surroundings. A little further down were six pairs of retractile eyes, embedded in the skin like studs on a leather-upholstered sofa. Twin mouths, stacked one above the other, formed rubber-lipped slits in the thick skin. The outside of the creature's lower body consisted of manipulative appendages – six flattish, hollow, rubbery tubes. Each tube ended in a sixfold ring of thinner tubes, whose tips in turn could separate into six wedge-shaped stubs for fine manipulation. At the centre of each such fractal trunk was a sphincter through which the creature could ingest solid, liquid, or gaseous food. The sixfold cascade of stomachs, the trifoliate brain, and var-

ious other organs hung inside the ring of trunks, below the main gasbag. A short tube for excretion poked out at an angle, oddly off-centre.

If the city builders were strange, their cities were stranger. Somewhere in their distant past the blimps had discovered that the component cells of the foam slabs could be persuaded to grow into virtually any shape by applying thin coatings of suitable hormones. Because the resulting structures, like the slabs, were neutrally buoyant, their forms were limited more by imagination than by physics. The main constraint, in fact, was Secondhome's weather. Even at those depths, Secondhome's dense atmosphere suffered from perpetual storms. The slab material was rigid enough to make permanent structures, yet flexible enough to bend with the wind. Even so, any structure that was long, thin, and insufficiently supported was always in danger of tearing loose, or damaging nearby parts of the city when it flapped in the hurricane-force breezes.

Viewed from above, a city resembled a coral reef. Close up, it was an intricate mass of tunnels, caves, huge open arenas, buildings that thrust skyward like squat trees with impossibly thick trunks, helical tubes, soft-edged pyramids, domes, bulbous sprouting fans, trailing lines of capsules like strings of fat sausages – all draped with webbing made from a net-like porous membrane, which improved structural integrity.

There were other creatures on Secondhome – creatures of a very different kind which had evolved as a symbiotic by-product of the balloon ecology. Early in the balloonists' evolution, their hydrogen had been obtained through a biological form of electrolysis, released from enclosed droplets of mineral-bearing fluid. The electrolytic action also deposited layers of unwanted metals. At first these metals had merely been ejected as waste, but as the aggregated cells became ever more complex, a new solution to the problem of waste disposal emerged – the coevolution of a parallel ecology of metallic bioma-chines. These "symbiauts" had no genetic material of their own, but increasingly large tracts of the balloonists' genome became devoted to the production of useful symbiauts. The symbiauts paid their evolutionary dues, and incidentally kept themselves viable, by performing increasingly complex tasks that enhanced the lives of the balloonists. At first they provided new and more efficient ways to store energy, but they quickly diversified into locomotion, weaponry, defence, camouflage, construction, food-processing, communication – even entertainment.

And because the slabs were flat on top, in the days before the blimps learned the art of city-building, the symbiauts mostly ran on wheels. Now, at every level, there were networks of road-like wheelways, frequented by the blimps' biomechanical symbionts.

And everywhere there were blisterponds – newly grown, mature, dilapidated, abandoned. These were pockets of dense gas, enclosed in a soft but incredibly strong transparent sheath to resist the high internal pressure. The blimps placed immense value on their blisterponds. They used them to hold stocks of preserved foodstuffs from the planet's denser depths for their long estivations, and – when the moment was right – as an aid to breeding. Every blimp possessed a personal blisterpond, and tended it with infinite care.



Halfholder had cast off from the side corner of the city's trailing edge, but below the habitable levels, the airflow was unpredictable. For the next half hour she had just two aims in mind. To avoid becoming caught up prematurely in the city's hanging tendril jungle, and to keep a weather eye open for snarks.

A vortex-train spun her out, down, and away, whirling in the smoky air, her six trunks spread wide like the spokes of a floppy wheel. Within seconds, the city began to dim in the all-pervading mists.

Desperately she spun, unbalancing her trunks to start a long, slow, controlled sideslip back towards the tendril jungle. If she lost contact now, the winds would carry her too far away from her objective.

The mists thinned, and she slipped diagonally past the vast tangled wall of tendrils. Down, down, towards their flailing tips, tapering in towards the centre where the city was vulnerable.

Halfholder consulted her prompter. Whispering Vanes was still on its intended course, now 17 miles below, and she was well within her safety envelope. But she was dropping faster than planned. Carefully she extracted a liftstick from her beltbag and stuffed it into her lower mouth. When the digestive juices hit, it would bubble liftgas into her abdominal cavities.

Trunks spreadeagled for maximum resistance, she floated slowly downwards like a bizarre snowflake. She rotated clockwise, paused, then anticlockwise. She was tempted to try a Death Spiral, but it was her first dive and such a manoeuvre might all too likely live up to its name. She settled for a conservative seesawing motion.

The tendrils' stalks began to narrow, the jungle thinning with every passing second. Her plans had reached the critical phase. With infinite care she opened the pouch and removed the Carrier. She primed its nodules with some of her own precious liftgas, drifted in as close to the edge of the tendril jungle as she dared, felt her gas-sacs tense uncontrollably.

She cradled the Carrier in the strongest cluster of trunks that she could assemble, drew it back – and hurled it from her, towards the jungle.

The Carrier fell in a parabolic arc, slid past the outer fringe of tendrils, and dropped like a stone. Its vestigial wheels spun uselessly in the airflow. Between it and Secondhome's metallic hydrogen core was nothing but roiling gases and liquids. Then its nodules jetted liftgas, slowing its descent. Its tiny graspers reached, touched, clung.

The Carrier began to climb the tendril.

Within was a capsule of rotworm spores, genetically tailored to that one city's genome. Over the next few days the Carrier would inject those spores, one by one, into the succulent flesh of the tendril. There they would encyst into egg-masses, then grow into tiny mobile plasts, burrowing deep into the tendrils' interior. The plasts would metamorphose into tiny parasitic worms, each of which would consume tiny amounts of tendril flesh – and, every few days, deposit several thousand new spores.

Soon the tendril jungle would be riddled with rotworms. Then the citizens of Sparkling Spires of the Colder Deep would have to evacuate – a tedious, disruptive procedure, for even an undamaged city was difficult to manoeuvre. After that, the city would die, sinking ever faster into the colder deep from which it

had taken its name.

Halfholder seesawed between wild elation and sick horror. But there was no way back – the course of the infestation was now unstoppable. Tormented by doubt, teetering on the brink of insanity, she drifted downwards, no longer aware of her surroundings.

Time passed. Sparkling Spires of the Colder Deep had long since faded into the orange-grey mists overhead.

A semblance of sanity returned.

She felt heady, wild, flooded with weird emotions. *This* she would never forget, not through a thousand estivations. Now she knew why the skydivers were unable to resist the urge to risk their lives, time and time again, in Secondhome's dangerous skies. The rush flowed through her sensitized veins, until her canopy felt as wide as a dozen cities, yet as small as a single parasitic shrimp.

Her initiation-task was accomplished. The next task was survival.

In an obsession born of arduous training, she checked her trajectory once more, and saw with some alarm that she was still falling too rapidly. She was within the safety envelope, to be sure – but if Whispering Vanes changed course, she could lose what little margin remained, and her remains would join those of countless others, revolving forever in the huge vortex of the Red Swirl.

She was just opening her beltbag to pull out another liftstick when the snark pack emerged from a thicket of airweed. There were five of them, carving effortlessly through the turbid air, their spiny mouths clamped shut in a grimace of instant death.

She had trained for this, too. Waiting until the pack had completely encircled her, edging closer for the kill, she removed a flash grenade from her beltbag.

The mouths began to open, revealing – as she knew they would, but that made it more frightening, not less – their short, razor-edged spines, able to tear her canopy to shreds. As the snarks surged forward, she tossed the grenade as high as she could throw it, clamped her trunks into a tight wedge, and exhaled a great bubble of liftgas.

Attracted by the sudden movement, the snarks darted after the grenade. As they did so, the gas bubble expanded, rising slowly.

The effect was even better than in the training simulators. The lead snark actually swallowed the grenade an instant before it exploded. Plastered thickly around the grenade's luminescent core was an oxygenic paste, and the explosion triggered a spurt of the toxic, corrosive gas. Mixed as it was with the bubble of liftgas, primed with the snark's bodily moisture, the unstable combination exploded in a burst of light that must have been visible back on Sparkling Spires of the Colder Deep. Halfholder kept her eyes tight shut, and *felt* rather than saw the blast as the snark pack came to pieces in a shower of torn, burning flesh. They fell around her like slow shrapnel.

She opened her eyes. One wounded, blinded, burning snark spiralled downwards trailing oily brown smoke, wailing terribly in an agony of death. Of the other four, she saw no sign.

She pulsed in ripples of relief. Then, having calmed down, she reached once more for a liftstick. The manoeuvre, effective though it had been, had cost her



half a mile in height.

Her groping trunks encountered nothing more than an empty bag. With growing horror, she realized what had happened. She had failed to secure the open bag when she threw the grenade, and the force of her dive had sucked out the beltbag's contents, tumbling irretrievably towards Secondhome's metallic hydrogen core, 50,000 miles below.

No liftsticks, no grenades, no knife, no ballast pods.  
No hope.

Infuriatingly, Whispering Vanes pursued its stately course. But that scarcely mattered now. She was falling outside the envelope, drifting lower with each passing second. Her prompter's computations were simple and deadly. She would come agonizingly close, she might even be able to reach the target city's fringemass – but she would miss the Edge by several hundred yards.

Halfholder took a deep breath, forced her trunks to rigidity, hoped for unexpected lift from a passing vortex, and began to chant her deathsong in a wavering voice.

The prompter's calculations were close.

She missed by less than 50 yards, plunging past the middle of the city's left edge. Seeking nothing more than a quick death now, she flung herself at Whispering Vanes's flailing fringemass. The bulbous trunks with their threatening spine-needles loomed from the mists... She closed her eyes –

A flock of pancake birds shot from the edge of the jungle, ripping and tearing as she whirled through them, smashing into her, destroying her forward momentum. Even death eluded her. Now there was nothing to stop her from falling endlessly into Secondhome's gravity well, down to where the pressure became so inconceivable that the atmosphere turned liquid, then (madness) solid. Long before she reached the layer of liquid molecular hydrogen, she would either have starved, or been squashed flat... With her knife lost, there was no way to hasten her end. She tore in a frenzy at the remains of the pancake bird –

And froze. There might yet be a way to safety. But she would have to move fast.

A dozen of the timid creatures fluttered around her. Delicately, so as not to frighten them, she extended her trunks towards them. The first eluded her grasp, but soon she had fastened on to four of the rubbery discs. She reeled them in like an angler, securing her grip with her remaining trunks.

Then she took a deep breath, and whistled. In panic, the captive birds flapped and fluttered. Only one thought can exist in a frightened pancake bird's mind.

*Gain height.*

For sickening moments the birds hesitated. Then, with a series of violent beats so strong that she nearly lost her grip, they soared upwards, pulling her with them. The fringemass shot past at a terrifying rate, and she struggled to direct the birds towards the city's rim, now becoming visible through the murk above her.

Suddenly the flat surface of the city slab was *below* her. Not caring where she might come to rest, she released her grip on the birds – and fell.

She landed dangerously close to the rim – deflated, bruised, battered, leaking gas from a dozen wounds,

trailing thin trickles of sticky fluid.

For several minutes she lay unmoving. Then her instinct for self-preservation kicked in. If the Elders of Whispering Vanes caught her now, she would pay the penalty of ritual deflation. Painfully, she dragged herself across the surface of the foam, ignoring how it scraped her hide, her mind set on only one thing – concealment.

Partially hidden behind a tall stand of waving bladderwort she saw an ancient, dilapidated blisterpond. Its skin was dull and flaky, its rim distorted, its lid sluggish and slimy. But it slid clumsily open, just enough for her to fall inside. She exuded a puff of hormone on to its walls, and it slid shut.

Now, perhaps, she could recuperate. The blisterpond still held a stock of preserved food. Her wounds would begin to heal. Soon she would be able to make contact with the skydivers of Whispering Vanes.

Above her, a city sickened and began to die. She mourned its impending loss. But even more she mourned the pockmarked surfaces of a score of worlds – moonlets, moons, planets – sacrificed to the blind fear of the Elders. What was one dead city, anyway, compared to their total loss through evolutionary stagnation?

What *was* one dead city?

Through her pain she came, slowly, to an understanding of what her crime would achieve.

Nothing. The destruction of Sparkling Spires, she now saw, was little more than a futile gesture. The Instrumentality had misled her in its insistence that this terrible act of rebellion would – somehow – bring about the triumph of the policy of benign neglect and end the carnage of the lesser worlds.

Now she saw that it could not. The Elders' mindset was too firmly entrenched, their power too great, public apathy about the Cause too prevalent.

It would take more. Much more. How many cities would the skydivers have to kill before the Elders were goaded into action? Might the cure be worse than the disease?

In a kind of delirium, crazy schemes flickered through her consciousness. Wait for approaching snow-strike and then sabotage the deflector system on the major moons... Assassinate the Elders as they estivated in their blisterponds... Cryptically reprogram the defence symbiauts...

It might take all of those things. It *would* take all of those things.

It was going to be a long campaign, and even if she avoided ritual deflation she would probably be dead before it succeeded. But there would be others, equally foolish, to continue her role.

And about one thing, the Instrumentality had not lied: the wild, heady excitement of the descent, the senses sharpened by mortal danger. The reckless ecstasy of utter freedom. The rush.

Already, she was planning her next dive.

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Ian Stewart & Jack Cohen are well-known British scientists (the former a mathematician, the latter a biologist) who, together and separately, have written many non-fiction papers and books. They have also collaborated on a number of sf stories for *Analog* and elsewhere. The above is their first contribution to *Interzone*.



# MUTANT POPCORN



Bruce Willis in *Armageddon* – "...nominally the star..."

The giveaway with *Armageddon* is that it's basically about the movie producer as hero. Though Bruce Willis may be nominally the star, the real saviour of humanity (as the ending, especially, takes time out to remind us) is Billy Bob Thornton's ground-team leader, who defies his backers in recruiting the right team for the job, steers the project through critical meetings with dazzling management skills, and keeps the shoot on track when head office tries to pull the plug. The very plot structure is another of that increasingly-recognizable brand that model themselves, for want of any better inspiration, on the movie production process, which is the only narrative curve for which the people in charge have any feel – through the pitch to the boardroom, the greenlighting, the casting, pre-production, shooting, completion, and tie-in franchising (notice the must-have NASA toys in the final montage).

There's a sign of the times here. Jerry Bruckheimer has been making no bones about trying to recreate the golden age of the producer-auteur, casting himself as a blast-toting Selznick redux and everyone else as employees. (Gale Anne Hurd also pro-

duced this movie, but you'd hardly notice from the credits.) And *Armageddon* does make a case for his unusually emphatic above-the-line statement of ownership, because you'd need to go a long way to find a more producerly picture. Casting, for example, is big, ostentatious, an unsubtle display of producer power and who you can get on board: a low-availability, high-ego star, and the ranks filled out with overqualified, artsy actors like Ben Affleck, Steve Buscemi, Will Hatton playing downmarket because they need the money more than their pride. But let's not be misled by this into thinking that the characters matter; quite the reverse, dimensionality is a no-no. In producerland, people don't want people, they want clusters of narrative reflexes. It's no coincidence that Buscemi has to get taped to a chair when he threatens to upstage the whole mission as the writers start to lose his character and his acting goes out of control in the low gravity,

because in the plot as in the production everyone is expendable, to be hired and retired at will. Simply as a moment in film history, the single most significant thing about *Armageddon* may turn out to be its displacement of the writer, in an artful revival of bullpen scripting: not this time the TV model adopted by such productions as *The Flintstones*, but in the mould of the classical Hollywood studios, with the writing farmed out by task to a mostly-uncredited *ouvroir* of job-tagged dialogue sharpeners, character polishers, plot people, gag writers, and the like.

Still, nobody could accuse *Armageddon* of hanging about. Never one to get rich by overestimating the attention span of the blockbuster public, Bruckheimer's circus enthusiastically promotes impatience as a virtue. In the first hour, especially, scenes are blinkingly short, dialogue pared and polished down to soundbite-sized clips, and much of the narrative inbetweening taken care of by musical montages. Even the exposition is brusquely cut off by Billy Bob's simultaneous translation of hard numbers into working man's speak ("It's the size of Texas... They're the size of bas-

Nick Lowe



ketballs, Volkswagens..."). As you'd expect, it takes an uncompromising view of its audience's discrimination, on the producerly principle that event movies can never be too dumb, too male, or too blue-collar. It's an appallingly enjoyable film that no reasonable person can enjoy without grave embarrassment, and which gleefully pokes chest with the middle-class viewer. So you think you're a broadminded citizen of the post-ironic mediaverse? huh? huh? you think you can handle insults to your intelligence? Well, [slapping lapels] handle this, college boy.

Pitched hard and straight at lower-middle America, *Armageddon* indulges attitudes off a checklist. Blue-collar private enterprise, outside of government and outside of corporations, is the fount of all true savvy. It's taken for granted that the President is President of the world, and For All Mankind means that the world overseas is represented by a few perfunctory second-unit inserts of rather sedate global panic while everyone waits for the US to save them. Above all, it's a boys' world. Immeasurably the worst thing in *Armageddon* is the Liv Tyler character: insultingly underwritten, amateurishly played, a passive and personless object of mechanical desires and tensions who exists only for the male leads to act out weird little roleplays around her about what men want. (And women? why, bless them, they just want what men want them to want.) With breath-stopping cheek, *Armageddon* parades an androcentric model of family that eliminates the mom altogether ("I don't blame you for my mother leaving – she left us both," and that's the last we hear of her) and reduces dysfunc-

tionality to a testosterone tussle between dad and boyfriend for ownership of the dynasty's nubile cutie, with guy-on-guy dialogue that only a battle-hardened vet like Willis could deliver with a straight face: "You gotta take care of my little girl. That's your job now. I always thought of you as a son." (There's a particularly telling contrast in the finale between the flatfaling inanity of the climactic reunion and the no less mechanical and manipulative, but genuinely touching, resolution of the underused Will Hatton's subplot.)

But we shouldn't judge too hard. It's *Armageddon*'s delighted luck to ride in on the slipstream of the ponderous, aspirational *Deep Impact*, than which it could hardly have prayed for a more favourable comparison, because for all its absurdities there's no contest as to which is the more truthful movie. *Armageddon*'s frank admission of imaginative failure to deal with the end of the world realistically ("It's unbelievable!" says a boardroom person to Thornton in an early story conference. "Well, actually," snaps BBT, "this is about as real as it gets") is incomparably healthier than *Impact*'s meretricious soapiness, and what's more it *doesn't* suggest that dads would rather their daughters gave them a hug than survived. Most of all, though, it gives a frank, full picture of how the trick of film is really done. "The fate of the planet," reflects a sceptical Agency voice, "is in the hands of a bunch of retards I wouldn't trust with a potato gun." Now that's telling truth.

If *Armageddon* is the art of the producer at its most focused, *Lost in Space* is a movie that has been pro-

duced beyond all human reason into a kind of transcendental dream state. Akiva Goldsman's name is on script and production, but even more than usually for a summer movie this is a film with a highly distributed web of authorship, a product of evolution rather than design, in which studio man's perverse fixations are granted unfettered play that borders on the surreal. From the moment the Robinsons plunge through their spacewarp into a pathless unknown, a free-associating narrative logic takes over as though the story is running through a databank of known plot constellations in vain search of something by which to navigate.

A very strange film indeed, *Lost in Space* offers a whole tariff of unconventional pleasures. At skin level, it's an appealing spectacle with a cast way too good for the material, and an unusually varied plotline assembled from a pick & mix assortment of genre templates including heavy *Star Wars* and *Alien* homages, an ambitiously involuted time-paradox superplot, and incidental echoes of pretty well everything you've ever seen from *Forbidden Planet* (there are some unsubtle *Tempest* clicks) to *Event Horizon* and, um, *Sphere*. As such, it stands as a kind of space-movie *summa*, an intertextual encyclopedia of its genre, impossibly fragmented and episodic but trying hard to offer everyone a little bit of something. All this has its own kind of hyperlogic, as if the Robinsons have gone through a plot warp and found themselves (as in the rare off-planet episodes in the original series) drifting aimlessly between genre situations and occasionally getting caught in the gravitational field of a big set piece. ("Look! It seems to be some kind of





giant floating spooky *Mary Celeste* in space plot! And we're heading right for it!") It makes no real sense, doesn't even attempt to untangle the causality paradoxes that make the climax possible, and invokes the authority of the original series' trademark cliffhangers to evade the need to bother with an ending.

But of course this isn't just a big, rather mad space movie: this is *Lost in Space* 98, palimpsest of the last and silliest pre-Roddenberry space serial that stands now as the most iconic attempt to colonize the stars and the future with the values, no less budgetary than ideological, of 1960s network television. More than most of its breed, the new *Lost in Space* is an exercise in radical revisionism, taking startlingly violent offence at its prototype's harmless inanities, and earnestly settling about deconstructing the arch conservatism of the 60s TV family from the sterner vantage of millennial Hollywood. The irony is that the movie version takes its gospel of the family lots more seriously than Irwin Allen's daffy series; that it's no less, and if anything rather more, reactionary in proclaiming the patriarchal nuclear family as the bastion of all human value; and that its analysis of dysfunctionality and its remedies is even further detached from social reality than the apple-pie domesticity of its very soft target.

The call to arms in *Lost in Space* is "saving the family," which turns out to reduce to the adult male characters' making hug-oriented choices about their relationships with father and/or son. "I'm going home," says the Smith-adopted Will Robinson from the alternative plotline: "I'm going to SAVE THE FAMILY." "Maybe it's no good saving a world of families if I can't save our own," muses the awfully intense William Hurt. There are genuflections towards emancipating the girlies from their homemaking function, but when it comes to the third-act crunch all the womenfolk are softly sidelined from any actual effectiveness, and their role collapses swiftly to Mau-reen as stabilizing nucleus, Judy as pricey bride in gift of dad to chosen son-in-law (*v. supra*), and Penny as testy adolescent whose tantrums are swiftly tamed by a cute CG pet and enforced rebonding with annoying kid brother.

As for the wrestling with masculinity, it's all like sitting in on a prayer meeting of some weird religious cult. "Funny creatures, men," says Mom R: "They try so hard not to wind up being their fathers, but they end up making the same mistakes." (I know this is bullet point 1 on the laminated *Guide to Human Beings* that Beverly Hills therapists issue to industry folk who don't know any to mix with, but is either half of this actually true of any male you've met?) Maybe it's a test. "Whenever your grandfather went on

a mission," says Dad to young Will Robinson in the obligatory promising-to-return scene, "he'd always give me these to look after" (*hands over fistful of dogtags*). If you can spot the unnerving flaw in this strategy of reassurance, you're probably one of those dangerous cranks who think the robot's joke is the funniest line of the summer, and your kids too will grow up warped and loveless and stop shaving and offer themselves for adoption by giant camp mutated spidermen. Oh, all right, one more time: "Why did the robot cross the road? Because it was carbon-bonded to the chicken." Hee hee hee hee – NO! No, I didn't mean it... gaark...

Obituaries for the silly season of '98 can't go without a paragraph remembering *Godzilla*, who weighed in so mightily, stomped around a bit, and fell over. The labelling of this noble if dimwitted beast as a failure – whether or not it'll turn out warranted once the merchandising receipts are in – says a tankful about the blockbuster industry. Nobody who cares about what Emmerich/Devlin have done for sf cinema could be wholly unmoved by this poignant history of an oversized, small-brained monster that just wanted a nest, only to end up bumping into things and upsetting people, and leaving a wake of coarse triumphalist headlines reading *Godzilla Defeated*. Though now taken to Hollywood's heart in a squeezing bearhug, the E-D team got where they are precisely by bypassing studio sensibilities, developing their own projects outside the system's sense of what was marketable; and perhaps they made a mistake with *Godzilla* in signing on to someone else's production that had already bounced around the development pin-table for a few years. (As is now no secret, they had been going to do a bolide movie before the poisoned *Godzilla* bait snagged them instead.) It's possible to doubt, now the experi-

ment's over, whether live-action monster movies were ever a revivable species. Maybe what *Godzilla* has shown is that the classical monster picture is a form whose time has come and gone as much as Bible epics and sword & sandal, their true home now in the animated genres.

Nevertheless, there were some welcome things about the *Godzilla* event while it lasted – not least the inducement to revisit and reflect on the roots and history of the Gajira mythos, the relationship between Japanese and American creature culture, and the contrasting place of the monster movie in long-range film history east and west. And while it's hard to get very excited about the largely-innocuous film at the centre of it all, there's plenty to respect, especially in contrast to the larger and less risktaking summer hits around it: the thoughtful internationalism; the thanklessly faithful regard for an unfashionable non-western genre; above all, the refreshing absence of any kind of sentimental cant about family values and inner healing. It would be a shame if *Godzilla*'s failure to hatch as hoped were to be put down to its cardbacked characters and feisty refusal to pander to Hollywood notions of what constitutes human drama, rather than to limitations of genre and a dearth of comic polish in the script. One could easily imagine a *Godzilla* as sharp and speedy as the first act of *Armageddon*, if only its indie-minded duo had been productively enough to do like Bruckheimer and hire Bob Towne for a couple of days of script dentistry. Instead, they've lost out to a fast-talking showman who set out cynically to reverse-engineer the impact of their own *Independence Day*, resulting in something twice as stupid as its model but at least half as fun – no negligible achievement, on either count. That may not be justice, but it's the business.

Nick Lowe

# Tube Corn

Wendy Bradley

I spent a bit of time in hospital a while ago and so found myself spending the height of the summer convalescing, trapped at home in that twilight world that is daytime TV. Tell me, whatever did we used to do on sick days before there was *Count-down*? What did we use to do on insomniac nights before they started repeating old episodes of *Highlander* (what happened to the new episodes?) and showing bizarre flotsam like *Renegade* (bloke with bike and lots of hair does the *Fugitive* thing). One discovery I am indebted to a reader for e-mailing me about: Channel 5's weekend morning screenings of *The New Adventures of Robin Hood*.

Do you suppose that there is some law that says every generation gets the Robin Hood it deserves? There



was the buttoned-up Richard Greene version (oh, you know – *da DA da dadit da DA DE DA ... Wheeeeeew-twaaaaang!*), all crisp white shirts and terribly terribly English. And then there was the new-agey, Clan-nad-themed, Herne the Hunter, Michael Praed (draw a discrete veil over Jason Connery) one. God, I miss the Michael Praed haircut. What can I tell you? I was imprinted with “abundant hair = male sexual signifier” in the 1970s.

Yes, well, the *New Adventures* aren't like that. Their Robin is a chubby faced Errol Flynn wannabe and it's their Little John who has the hair (but it's nowhere near the Michael Praed class). Their take on the mythos, though, has Maid Marian reinvented as a Lady Warrior which means, naturally enough, that she gets to show lots of leg and cleavage and, for some arcane warrior reason, wear rabbit's-foot epaulettes. Go figure. The production values are, erm, shall we say, not particularly high, but the great joy is the light scenes, which make Xena's look like masterpieces of gritty realism. If every generation gets the Robin it deserves, what on earth have the youth of today been *doing* while our backs have been turned?

But hey, you don't want to hear about silly-season programming: what you really want is to hear about how I became a TV star. Yes you do. Yes. You do. My 15 minutes of fame – OK, OK, three minutes, but who's counting – came on the wittily-named programme **404: Not Found**. No, I didn't know what it meant either: it's a computer error-message. I was there as part of an item on the effect of the internet on *Star Trek* fandom on a half-hour, allegedly humorous, programme on Sky's [tv] channel. No, my cable provider doesn't offer it either and, yes, my dad's next-door neighbour videoing it for me probably did double the viewing figures.

What's that? Well, it was my third time on the box, actually. Once on *Right to Reply*, once on *Biteback* and now on, er, this. Yes, I've had my 15 minutes of fame (although I want some of them back – either that or a recount). So as a service to the public I thought I'd offer you my simple rules of How To Behave on Telly.

Rule one: always look behind you. Now be honest, what do you remember about the World Cup after this length of time? I'll tell you what I remember: that the first England match was played in Marseilles. I don't remember the other team, the score, or the name of the player being interviewed. But I remember the post-match TV interview. The good people of Marseilles had put up a HUGE sign behind the players' heads of the name of their town. The

TV picture was framed, however, so that the letters ILLES of Marseilles weren't visible.

And nor was the M.

The moral of the story? As I said, always check what's behind you. Of course checking that you aren't sitting in front of a blue screen isn't quite enough – (although *Biteback* were frankly astonished when I refused to sit in front of a blue screen until I had their specific assurance of what they were going to matte in behind me.) *404: Not Found* had a set of shelves, a toy Godzilla and a stuffed penguin which seemed innocuous enough. Sadly I hadn't thought about on-screen captions, and thus appeared subtitled as “Paid to watch TV.” Not *quite* how I would summarize my life story but, there you go, it's a tough job and someone's got to do it.

Rule two has to be, look after number one. People who *know who you are* are going to see you up there and you are going to want to be able to look them in the eye afterwards. So don't rely on there being a Hollywood makeup artist on site – *Right to Reply* made me up (Me: “So can I have cheekbones?” Makeup person: “Sorry, no time to do liposuction.” Collapse of stout party. Rule 2[a], always be nice to the makeup person.) For *404* I went ready made up, just in case, and then noticed on the monitors that I was, er, glowing and had to demand powder – which, I suspect, came purloined from the bottom of someone's handbag. Mind you, I was also convalescent and had to demand a chair and a cold drink too... and this was not the kind of well-padded operation that has gophers ready and willing to jump to your every whim but more the kind of operation that has to have a whip-round to send someone down to the canteen for some cokes. So thanks for the drinks, chaps, and sorry if I sounded like Bette Davis but it was that or pass out on the floor.

Rule three would have to be show up on time. I managed it, just, but got stuck behind some guy delivering boxes and found myself in a Keystone Cops comedy rehearsal in the doorway – man moves left, boxes move right, door is blocked, I zig, he zags, repeat ad nauseam. Or until you hear someone address the studio apologetically with “Our four o'clock interviewee is late” and pipe up “no, I'm not,” thus making an entrance like the dead guy in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

Rule four, of course, is that, whatever you do, you're going to hate how you look and how you sound. You know the irritating person who always explains that your own voice sounds alien on tape because you're hearing it through air the way everyone else hears it, rather than through the bones in your ears which is how you normally hear it? Well, I'm the irritating person who always

feels called on to explain that normally you only ever see yourself in a mirror – as a mirror image – and on a TV screen you're finally seeing yourself moving the “right” way round, the way everyone else normally sees you. I'm not sure about the theory that everyone looks ten pounds heavier on TV: but I do recall most distinctly that they promised to turn me into a size-eight blonde in post-production. Lying bastards.

Finally, think about the questions. Well, don't just think about them, prepare answers to them. And don't just prepare them in the sense of think of the words you're going to say and write them down on a piece of paper. Say them out loud. There are some words and phrases that are just unsayable – did you know, for example, that it is impossible to say the word “wigwam” on the stage without someone in the cast corpsing? – and it's as well to discover this in the privacy of your own bathroom rather than in front of several million – all right, several hundred – viewers. Also if you have one point to make, one thing to say, at least there's a chance that it will fall out of your mouth even in that awful moment when you notice there's a camera pointing at you and your brains slide out of your ears in a puddle of goo. Which is why I started assertively declaring that “science fiction is *intelligent* fiction” – because I'd rehearsed it – and then degenerated rapidly into something along the lines of “urble burble bleah.”

They had, to give them credit, warned me about the final question, which they said they were making a running joke of asking everyone. “So, is this yet another example of the net empowering the individual in the face of faceless corporations?” When we rehearsed it I answered, quick as a flash, “Duh!”

And everyone in the studio laughed. The director said earnestly, yes, but do you mean “duh” as in “duh, I don't know” or “duh” as in “duh what a stupid question, obviously yes.” So when we were recording, it went “So, is this yet another example of the net empowering the individual in the face of faceless corporations?” “Duh! Yes!” “Thank you.” “Thank you.” End. Cameras off. Presenter: “I didn't think you were actually going to say that!” I spent weeks wondering what kind of an idiot I was going to look when it was broadcast. So, is this yet another example of the net empowering the individual in the face of faceless corporations? Answers on a postcard, please.

Wendy Bradley can be contacted on [wbradley@easynet.co.uk](mailto:wbradley@easynet.co.uk)



After some days, as we returned from the Place of Obeisance, I said to Melior Dorvac, "But Melior, why do we bow to the indigenes?"

It was early morning, and we had just turned from Boulevard Imata into the tree-lined lane that wound its way up towards my grandmother's house. No one was near, and only flying-foxes could have overheard my question. It made no difference: Melior grabbed me, pulling me into the trees.

"Jarc! By the gods of the Imata Yam Yana, promise me you'll never speak like that again!"

"Melior, you're hurting me! Speak like what?"

For a moment I thought this could only be a joke. Then I saw fear in the old servant's eyes. In an anguished whisper he told me that no one must question the sacred ones, and no one, no one at all, must utter the word *indigenes*.

"It's what they're called, isn't it?"

"Jarc! They're the Imata Yam Yana! Show disrespect to the sacred ones, and you bring down suffering on us all. Will you obey me, Jarc? Oh, say you will obey me!"

I nodded dumbly, more astonished than frightened. Back home in Vadan, I would never merely have accepted such commands – least of all from a servant! When I had asked my old she-nurse a question, it was answered. But already I knew that many things – too many – were done differently, here on the island of Cul.

Dutifully I imitated Melior as he stepped back, tracing the Circle of Obeisance on his forehead and his chest.

"May the gods be kind to the Imata Yam Yana..."

I echoed the words.

"Melior, look! Rom's smiling!"

"Don't be silly, Jarc," said the old servant.

But he looked into my brother's cot all the same. It was our birthday, and a splendid day it had been. Melior had made a special nursery tea, then read us one of the legends of Dragon Alcastes, who came when Prince Uy threw magic dust in the air. Of course, Rom couldn't quite share in the tea, and couldn't understand the story; if he was my twin, he was the same as me only in his age. Still, I was sure Rom could feel our happiness. Standing on tip-toes beside Melior, I urged the old servant to say that it was so.

Melior stroked my brother's hand. "The poor, poor child!"

"Melior?" My voice rose in pitch. "Rom must be happy, mustn't he?"

"To lie here like a baby for the rest of his life? I curse the accident that left him this way... yet ah, perhaps we should all be happy, were his fate to be ours!"

"No!" I turned away, my face hot. Melior called behind me, but I stamped out on to the veranda, slamming the screen door. How could Melior be so stupid? For a time I had thought I could love him, too – why, perhaps as much as I had loved my old she-nurse! But then, perhaps it was I who was stupid. From the moment I had known there was something wrong with my brother, I had wanted to deny it – wanted others to deny it, too.

# The Indigenes

Tom Arden

Tearfully I looked into the gathering darkness. A chill wind was playing on the air, as if considering the prospect of a gale. Byna-trees rustled uncertainly, all across the slopes of my grandmother's garden.

"Melior Dorvac!" I turned as the new voice sounded through the screen. "What is the meaning of this? At any moment the sacred ones shall be here! Where's the boy? Haven't you dressed him in his paja-robess?"

It was my grandmother. In the weeks since we had come to Cul Island, I had seen little of the stern matriarch with cropped grey hair and hard, unyielding eyes. All I knew was that I did not like her, and wondered how my mother could have been her daughter. In Vadan, women were soft, decorative creatures in flowing gowns; here, it was men who were decorative, and women who maintained an austere façade of authority.

At once, Melior was rushing about nervously, clattering with the tea-things and discarded shoes and jackets. Who were these sacred ones who were coming to visit? Melior had said nothing, and I did not understand. Frightened, I slipped back into the nursery.

"And what's this?" With a start, I saw my grandmother pick up the book that Melior had left lying in his chair. Her eyes blazed as she flung it into the fire. "You dare read the old tales of Vadan in my house? Wicked man, don't you know that children must learn only the legends of the Imata Yam Yana?"

I blundered, "Grandmother Lar, I'm sorry. It wasn't Melior's fault... I begged and begged. Mother used to read it to us... to Rom and me... oh, over and over!"

The anger died in my grandmother's eyes. "May the gods of the Imata Yam Yana preserve you," she muttered, and knelt down, smoothing my hair. "Poor Jarc, it's not been easy since the accident, has it? But then, how could it be? I know your pain, for it was mine, too, when my daughter ran away with a Man of Vadan. Forgive me if her death can mean little to me, for I had lost her already. Still, the Imata Yam Yana say there is no evil that does not bring some good. From my daughter's elopement came a beautiful child; now, her death has brought that child home to me."

I sniffed, "And Rom, too?"

"Rom, too." My grandmother squeezed me tightly. "Poor Jarc, you are young yet, but that can be a blessing. Had you stayed in Vadan, you should certainly have been lost. Soon you shall learn our ways, becoming enlightened like the Men of Cul. Now come, you must ready yourself for the sacred ones."

I smiled weakly, but found my gaze slipping towards the fire, where Dragon Alcastes was burning to ash, with all the other legends of the land where I was born.

"Melior?"

He was sitting by the fire; by now, it provided the



room's only light. I stood in the middle of the carpet, rubbing my eyes. The wind that played through the garden had swollen, as I had feared, into a heady gale. Groanings and bangings sounded through the house.

"Melior?" I said again. This time the old servant stirred, and turned to me. He stretched out his arms and I clambered on to his knee.

"Poor Jarc! Is it the noise?"

"Not just the noise. It's Dragon Alcastes."

Melior smiled, "You're not afraid of him?"

I pointed into the flames. "I mean he's gone."

Lying in bed, I had kept wondering why my grandmother had burnt the book. She had said there was no evil that did not bring good. Weren't the old stories part of Vadan's good? Earlier, in the drawing-room, a man in a wooden mask had recited one of the tales of the Imata Yam Yana. I listened respectfully, but the tale was merely strange to me, as if it came from an alien world. There was something about a flying-fox, a snake, and a time before the sun-god breathed out fire. Enraptured, my grandmother had gazed into the mask. I only thought of Dragon Alcastes, and struggled not to sigh.

Melior tapped my skull. "But is he really gone? He's still in there, isn't he?"

"Melior, what if I forget him?"

"Forget him? No one could forget Dragon Alcastes!"

I brightened. "Not even Rom?"

"Ah Jarc, now that we can't know. But would it be better for Rom if he remembered? Or if he forgot?"

Now I was puzzled, and hung my head.

Melior said kindly, "Jarc, you know your brother shall never run and play. Or grow. Not really... not like you."

I supposed it was true. In the drawing-room, weighed down by my paja-robies, I had interrupted the story, asking why my twin brother should not join us, too. Frowning, my grandmother had hushed me, then smiled apologetically to the man in the wooden mask. I hated her then, for I knew she cared more for her guest than for my brother.

All around the veranda, the screen doors were rattling. The wind whistled in the chimneys. "Melior," I began again, "no one can hear us now. Won't you tell me about the indigenes?"

It was not the first time I had renewed my question, but this time I saw no fear in Melior's eyes, only sadness. "Jarc, haven't I told you? Never, never must you question the Imata Yam Yana."

"I wasn't questioning, only asking..."

But then, I wasn't sure what I was asking. Or was I? Already I had learnt things, if not the most important things, about these people I still thought of as indigenes. Again I pictured the man in the wooden mask. His days were passed in the Place of Obeisance, where the ruling peoples came to pay their respects. Each night, accompanied by his silent wives, he would visit one of a circuit of wealthy homes. There, the finest hospitality would be his; there, even his lowliest wife would share fulsomely in the bounty...

The contrast with Vadan could not be more marked. There, the indigenes were a degraded people, who stank and dressed in rags and lived in slums. So the servants, and my mother, had told me many times. Seldom had I actually seen an indigene, but sometimes one would stray into our fine street, staggering drunkenly,

begging for change, before the patrols could bundle him away.

Shifting on Melior's knee, I decided upon a cautious approach, asking him whether he came from Vadan or from Cul. Relieved at this seeming change of direction, he declared himself to be a Man of Cul.

"But you've been to Vadan?"

"Jarc, no! Only fine folk can travel between the islands. Or sailors... and I've never much fancied going to sea. Should you like to see old Melior on the ocean wave, green with the seasick, jammed down in steerage with the servants and the rats?"

I forced a laugh. I could have told him that in Vadan there were balloons that carried men into the sky, soaring up like Prince Uy, riding on Dragon Alcastes' back. But it didn't seem quite to the point, and besides, I supposed Melior wouldn't believe me. But then, would he believe me about the indigenes? I was wondering how to work my way back to this theme when an anguished cry came from across the nursery.

"Rom!"

I sprang up, rushing to my brother's cot. Every so often, since the accident, Rom had been subject to mysterious attacks. They came upon him suddenly, wracking his normally inert frame with convulsions, forcing terrible sobs through his lips. Usually the attacks did not last long, but more than once, Rom's tongue had caught in the back of his throat, choking off his breathing. It happened now.

Swinging round, I wailed, "Melior, the tongue!"

For a moment it seemed I was crying across a vast empty space. Then Melior was beside me, cupping Rom's head, prising open the tiny mouth. Gently, stroking him, making hushing sounds, the old man held my brother as the attack subsided. Helplessly I looked on, tears in my eyes, shaken at the reality of Rom's pain.

Moanings, judderings surrounded the house, as if some evil presence were trying to get inside.

"Such a beautiful day!"

"Beautiful? I'd call it exquisite!"

"I declare, my feathers shall be wilting!"

"Hm, the sky's quite cleared, hasn't it?"

"It was veritably Vadan for a while!"

"Vadan? Now when were you ever in Vadan?"

"Bitch!"

"But beautiful. Or should I say exquisite?"

The voices belonged to a party of young men, decked out in all the finery of their status. In Vadan, they would have been she-men, objects of contempt as much as the indigenes; in Cul, it seemed, everything was upside down. Fluttering their fans, preening and flirting, they swished their way through the crowded gardens.

It was a week later, and Grandmother Lar was hosting an exclusive gathering. The occasion was the latest wedding of Chief Ubaka Zan, or – as I thought of him – the man in the wooden mask. My grandmother, I had learnt, was eager to rise in Cul society. This wedding was to prove her worthiness. Never, she had promised, would the Imata Yam Yana have been treated with greater respect. Totem-poles dotted the gardens, and my grandmother's man-maids were all



dressed in fabrics of native design. Slowly, at careful intervals, the great matriarchs were arriving, together with the most sacred of the sacred ones. The wedding looked set to be a splendid success.

"When does it begin, Melior?" I said. "I think Rom's growing impatient, don't you?"

The old servant smiled, "Jarc, I don't think he can be as impatient as you."

I shifted heavily from foot to foot, wishing I could discard my paja-robos. By a flower-bed in the middle of the ornate gardens, the three of us were stationed like an exhibit – a demonstration, perhaps, of my grandmother's charity.

"We've a good view of the gardens, haven't we?" urged Melior, with a certain strained jollity.

"Why can't we promenade like the others?" I said.

"Jarc, you know Rom's chair is too heavy to push. Besides, we're well-placed for the wedding."

"It'd better be good," I muttered.

"Jarc!"

Sourly I studied my grandmother in the distance, abasing herself before a tribal elder. Afterwards she snapped her fingers for a man-maid, plucked a glass from his laden tray, and exchanged urbane pleasantries with other dark-suited women.

Bored, I became aware of a pressing physical urge. I squirmed, looking pleadingly at Melior.

"Jarc, really! Don't you know gentlemen must endure such discomfort, if they are to partake of the social pleasures?"

"I'm not a gentleman, I'm a little boy."

He rolled his eyes and I pushed my way between the flowers. Behind the bright beds of vulcanulvus and dragonback, jamajaz and laca, was a line of byna-trees, forming one side of a shaded walk. I sighed as my hot stream darkened the bark, then ran in rivulets across the dappled path.

I heard voices.

"Lar's daughter? How dreadful!"

"She married a Man of Vadan. What is one to expect?"

"Quite. But to die for a cause so wicked!"

"Well, death was hardly her choice."

Curious, I drew back into the foliage. My robe dragged, and I tugged at the fastenings, letting it fall behind me. In those days, there was much I did not understand, but I knew the voices were speaking of my mother – my father, too.

Through the dim greenery, walking stiffly, came two grey-haired women. One wore a silvery, severe sash; the other, the high-collared tunic of the senatorial class.

They came to a halt on the shaded path.

SASH: Still, the Vadans won't give up what is ours?

COLLAR: Negotiations are ongoing, but prospects are bleak – I've never seen them so bleak.

SASH: What, even after the Inter-Island Agreement?

COLLAR: Especially after the Agreement. The Men of Vadan insist upon their rights, much as we insist on ours.

SASH (*wryly*): There is a *right* to inflict injustice?

COLLAR: Nonetheless, they will have their injustice. A quota, they say! Is it to be credited?

SASH: Alas, for the cruelty of the Men of Vadan! Are

the Imata Yam Yana never to see their brave brothers go free?

COLLAR: You are hinting darkly, ambassador?

SASH: If the Vadans will not release their sacred ones, they must be made to release them, must they not?

COLLAR: Never fear, there are those who would make them. But I don't think we shall be sending Chief Ubaka's warriors.

SASH: Senator, now it is you who hints darkly!

*(Pause. They stand close together, faces furrowed in concern. That's when COLLAR sees the dark rivulet, running beneath her feet. Her nostrils flare. I draw back into the trees, but too late. A hand flashes forward, grabbing me.)*

COLLAR: A boy-child! Who is he?

SASH: He's not dressed properly!

COLLAR: Child, where are your paja-robos?

SASH: Has he no respect?

COLLAR: Is he a servant's son?

SASH (*to me*): Some servant's brat, are you?

COLLAR: Spying on his betters?

SASH: Be off with you, brat!

COLLAR: Wait! That's Lar's grandson, isn't it?

SASH: The traitor's brat?

COLLAR: He's running away!

SASH (*wearily*): Oh, let him go! He's just a boy-child!

I collapsed into the undergrowth, breathing heavily. Fear mingled in me with a strange exaltation. I had run beyond the boundaries of the neat garden, into the woods that lay beyond. My heart hammered and I gazed up into the sharp sunlight, flickering through the web of barely-moving branches.

"What's your name?" came a voice.

I started. Looking down at me was a small, mischievous face. Thick with dirt, surmounted by a shock of dishevelled dark hair, the face seemed to belong to another boy. I scrambled up, but when I said my name, the stranger only told me not to be silly.

"That's a boy's name."

"I am a boy!" Indignant, I tugged at my breeches, but my companion seemed unimpressed. Twirling, then slumping down on a mossy log, the child squinted up at me with suspicious eyes.

"If you're a boy, where are your paja-robos?"

I scoffed, "Where are yours?"

"I'm a girl, silly!"

My face flushed. Girls of Vadan had never been like this! Hastily, I fastened my breeches again; looking on incuriously, the girl only repeated her question about my robes.

"I threw them away," I mumbled.

"Threw them away!" Contempt filled her voice. "Why would a paja-boy do such a thing?"

"They were heavy. And silly." I sat defiantly on the other end of the log.

"You're a strange boy, then. If you're really a boy."

"I'm from Vadan!"

"The other island?" The girl's eyes grew wide. In an instant, her manner towards me was quite altered. Eagerly she shifted along the log towards me. "I've always wanted to go to Vadan. Is it true there are



horseless carriages, and balloons that carry people into the sky?"

"Of course! Why, in Vadan, the buildings are bigger, the roads are wider, the gardens greener, the sky more blue. The rivers are deeper, the mountains higher... oh, and Vadan Harbour is the envy of the world."

"Tell me more," the girl urged.

Triumphantly I looked into her pleading face. Really, it was a very dirty face, and I wondered what sort of girl she could be. But questions could wait. My shame forgotten, for some moments I expatiated boastfully on my native land, where liquid gold flowed from mountain springs and every forest turning led to hidden marvels. By now, of course, I was drawing freely on the strange, splendid things encountered by Prince Uy, in his many adventures with Dragon Alcastes.

Dreamily, hugging her knees, the girl said how much she longed for adventure.

Indeed, she was not like a Vadan-girl, and I told her as much; but it was then that I became abashed again, thinking that Vadan, for all its splendours, would not be so wonderful if you were a girl. At least, if you were a girl like my new friend.

I said kindly, "So you see, it's just as well you were born on Cul."

The girl looked down. She did not seem quite sure. "Do you know what I'd really like?" she said after a moment. "I think I'd like to run away."

My eyes brightened. "Escape from Cul?"

"Could we?"

There flashed into my mind another memory of Dragon Alcastes. In one story, Prince Uy and Princess Uz led a party of explorers into the wilds of Cul; I think the princess must have stowed away, for she would never have been allowed on such a journey. In any case, marauding indigenes set upon them; the common Vadans were killed, and the prince and princess imprisoned in an underground cave. Later the indigenes would come back to retrieve them, for it seemed they were to form the centrepiece of a ceremonial feast. Of course, they escaped. With magic dust, Prince Uy summoned Dragon Alcastes, and the dragon, with his flaming breath, destroyed the indigenes, then bore the royal couple home on his back. How they soared, how they swooped! In a matter of moments they had crossed the sea between the islands, returning to a different type of ceremonial banquet.

I asked my new friend if she knew the story, but she only shook her head. I felt sorry for her, and wished that I had some magic dust.

The girl was more practical. "Now where could we go?"

"Why, to Vadan," I said.

The girl blinked. "Or?"

"Somewhere else?" I said, puzzled.

"Is there somewhere else?" she asked.

I wasn't sure; in any case, my enthusiasm was a fragile thing. I looked again at my ragged, dirty companion, and a sense of uselessness came over me. Escape, indeed!

Besides, I could never leave my twin brother.

I sprang up, kicking my way through the undergrowth. I supposed I was making my way back to the gardens. The girl followed me, clinging to my arm. Now

she wanted to know more about Vadan.

"And the women. Do they really dress like men?"

I thought of my soft, beautiful mother. I shook my head.

"So they're not like here?"

"No. I mean yes... I mean, it's all different." I liked my new friend, but now I wished she would leave me. I was confused, and wanted to be with Rom again. I sighed, "The big difference is the indigenes."

"The what?"

Really, she was ignorant! "The Imata Yam Yana."

The girl sniffed. We had reached the edge of the gardens now, and the fine lawns stretched before us. It occurred to me that my dirty companion hardly belonged on my grandmother's estate, but the girl seemed unperturbed.

"Father says they're held in bondage."

"What?"

"The Imata Yam Yana. On Vadan. He says that's the way the Vadans want them. To make them feel better about themselves, he says."

"That's silly! How could it make them feel better?"

"It does. But I wonder about the Imatas here, too."

"Wonder what?" I was irritable now.

"Whether they're prisoners here, too."

"That really is silly," I said, more sharply than I had intended.

The girl bridled, "Silly?"

I rounded on her. "Silly, silly, silly!"

It was all she needed. In the next moment, she had launched herself upon me. Viciously, we rolled and tumbled on the grass. A moment more, and rough hands were grabbing me, pulling me away. It was a man-maid.

"Let me go!"

"You vicious little boy! By the gods of the Imata Yam Yana, if you weren't the madam's grandson..."

He said no more. Disgusted, he flung me from him, grabbed the girl instead, and bundled her away. I scrambled up, gazing in astonishment after the dirty girl as she writhed, indignant, in the man-maid's grip.

"Princess Renda, really!" I heard him say. "What's happened to your finery? Now come quick, it's time for your father's wedding!"

I crashed back through the flower-beds.

"Jarc! Where have you been? And... look at you!"

For the first time since I had known him, Melior was in a rage. I cowered, fearing he might even strike me. In the event, he only thrust me behind my brother's chair, endeavouring to conceal my robeless, dishevelled state. I peered round the curve of the chair. All the guests had gathered on the slopes below us now, looking expectantly towards the bottom of the gardens. My own gaze lingered upon my grandmother. Standing close by, she was flanked by the stern figures of Collar and Sash. But if I hoped they had not noticed my disgrace, I was disappointed. The three women darted savage glances towards me, then turned away in unison. It seemed I was in trouble. Serious trouble.

Sadly I looked at Rom. Wiping a line of dribble from his mouth, I thought of all the things I might whisper to him that night, leaning over the side of his cot. The world was very confusing. If only he would talk to me,



and help me understand! I swallowed hard. I sniffed. I sighed.

Melior nudged me. "Jarc! Shh!"

Beneath a broad canopy of trees, the ceremony was about to begin. Raised on a dais, spear in hand, Chief Ubaka Zan stood proudly, bedecked in all the magnificence of his station. Huge, bright feathers sprouted from his head-dress. Mud and leaves daubed his limbs. Newly polished, his wooden mask glittered in the sunlight that played through the leaves.

But he was not alone on the dais.

I whispered to Melior, "Who are all those others?"

"His brothers. And sons. From his earlier marriages."

"But on the other side?"

"His wives, of course."

"And daughters?"

"Daughters, too. Now hush!"

Squinting, I studied the gathering of women, clustered ignominiously at the back of the dais. Several girl-children stood in the front, and one of them, I was certain, was my new friend from the woods, hastily thrust into ceremonial robes. It occurred to me that the robes were rather like the ones I had lost; just different in design, that was all.

The ceremony began with tribal dancing. First, lines of girls in grass skirts, with bobbing naked breasts, wove their way exuberantly round the proud chief and his relatives. There were beating drums, clacking bones. Young warriors came next, performing an ancient war-dance; a witch-doctor cast an elaborate spell; tribal priests sang invocations of blessing. Rapturous applause followed each turn.

"I declare," I heard my grandmother say, "there is nothing to compare with the Imata Yam Yana!"

"So spiritual," said Collar.

"Elemental," said Sash.

"They preserve what we have lost."

"They remind us of our roots."

"They live in tune with the balance of nature."

"Ah, if only we had let them be!"

"Can we ever atone for our ancestral crimes?"

"Only by respecting the Imata Yam Yana. At all costs, we must preserve their culture."

By now, the chief's new bride had been brought on to the dais, carried on a litter by men-slaves with painted limbs and necklaces of rattling bones. First she was made to stand before the crowd, spredeagled like a suppliant. The drums pounded harder and the chanting rose higher as the slaves ripped away layers of leaves and bark, stuck with thick mud to her torso and limbs. At last she was naked, and I thought how young she looked; how young, and how frightened.

Now the priest returned. In his hand he held a gleaming knife. First he traced it between the girl's breasts; then he passed it back and forth before her lips.

"Melior!" I hissed. "What's he doing?"

"Jarc, shh!"

But I asked again. In the old tales of Dragon Alcastes, indigene tribes had done terrible things. Was this girl not the bride at all, merely a preliminary sacrifice?

Melior whispered, "He's cutting out her tongue."

I turned pale.

"I don't mean really," he added quickly. "I mean, he's

pretending. To show she'll be silent after the wedding."

I wailed, "It's horrible!"

"It's their culture. Now Jarc, hush. The most sacred moments come next."

Suddenly the drumming stopped; the chanting, too. On the dais, before her husband-to-be, the bride was made to stand with one leg raised, arms outstretched, while the priest sprinkled her with powders and oils. Slowly, like a ripple passing across the gardens, all the fine guests were kneeling respectfully. Silence fell and my grandmother turned to me, flashing a warning glance.

As I kneeled, I struggled to restrain my emotion. I thought of my new friend from the woods, wondering what fate lay before her. I thought of my father and my beautiful mother, wondering who had killed them, and why. I thought of Rom. I thought of Melior. The old man reached for me, holding me tight.

The silence was absolute. The guests bowed their heads; through my hands, I peered illicitly at the dais again. Still the bride stood like a stork, her spindly limbs juddering with the strain.

This, I would learn, was the most sacred moment of all.

Then it happened. All at once, my brother convulsed in his chair, gasping, kicking, jerking.

I shrieked, "Rom!"

Heads turned. The bride sprawled. My grandmother screamed.

In the next moment, man-maids were rushing forward.

I bucked. I writhed.

I swooped. I soared.

Borne through the air I saw the gardens, the guests, my humiliated grandmother whirling past my eyes; I saw Melior, reaching desperately, dragged by the man-maids from my brother's chair; I saw my brother, purple-faced, kicking weakly one last time.

"Jarc, drink this. Please."

I shook my head. Long hours had passed, but to me it seemed that time had stopped when my brother died. I was not thirsty. I was not hungry. Long ago, all the guests had gone, and the bright gardens had given way to a restless, rustling darkness. I lay on my bed and could not move, staring impassively at the shadowed ceiling.

A scream echoed down the corridor. Twice already that night, I had heard my grandmother scourge herself; she had begun again. Melior gripped my hand. Slowly, very slowly, I looked into his eyes.

"She killed him, didn't she?"

Melior nodded.

I said, "But that's not why she's screaming now."

The old man sighed, "Your grandmother has failed. She wanted to be one of the great ones of the island. Now she is not. And shall not be."

Later I would learn that the wedding had been postponed. It would take place next month at another, finer house, where the guests could be controlled and respect ensured. My grandmother would not be invited; after all, as some would say, she had always been tainted by her unfortunate family.

I said, "I thought there was no evil that did not bring some good."

"The Imata Yam Yana believe that – not her."



"No?" I said bitterly. "But she loves them so."

Melior smiled, "No Jarc, no. She doesn't love the Imata Yam Yana."

I looked at him curiously; again, I thought there was much that I did not understand. Murmuring thanks, I took the glass of milk that he urged upon me again.

"Melior, about my father and mother. They didn't just die, did they?"

"I'm afraid they're dead, Jarc."

"I mean the accident... it wasn't just an accident."

Melior looked down. "Your father was an anti-exportationist."

"A what?"

"Well, in Vadan there are two types of people, so I've heard tell. There are those who want to export the Imata Yam Yana. Then there are those who don't, and those people... well, there are people here in Cul who don't like them. Don't like them at all. Your grandmother, for one. But others... others, too."

I was not much enlightened, but for the moment I could not think what to ask next. The scourging had stopped again and the house was silent. Suddenly I was very tired. Melior took my glass, then helped me into my nightshirt. He tucked me into bed. He smoothed the covers.

"Melior," I said dreamily, "are there places other than Vadan? And Cul?"

Now he smoothed my hair. "The world is wide."

"But we don't see it, do we? I mean, it's difficult."

"Very difficult, Jarc. But sometimes, we can escape our destiny."

"Can we, Melior?"

He said mysteriously, "I didn't want to be a performing monkey. I was lucky, I could pass. Blood is much mingled in these islands, Jarc, for all that some would pretend otherwise. Oh yes, I'm a lucky man, all things considered."

"Melior?" My brow furrowed.

"Sleep, my child. Sleep now."

He kissed me as if it were an ordinary day, and retired to his own narrow bed. Out in the gardens, the wind was rising; redly, the firelight shivered in the grate. My eyes were heavy, but that night it seemed I lay awake for hours, staring into the chill shadows, listening to the stirring of the restless leaves. Fancifully I imagined Dragon Alcastes, swooping and plunging through the windy sky. How I longed to ride on his back!

Then I thought of him burning in the fire. Then I thought of my brother, cold and still. Tears would have burst from my eyes at last, but instead I became aware of a soft tapping, then a scratching, at the veranda door. I raised my head. Melior was asleep now; for hours, it seemed, I had been aware of his slow, rhythmic breathing. Cautiously I pushed back the covers from my bed. I tip-toed through a pool of moonlight to the door. I smiled. On the other side of the screen was a small, mischievous face.

**Tom Arden** is the pseudonym of an Australian-born writer, now in his 30s, who has worked as an academic in Britain for a number of years. His first novel, *The Harlequin's Dance*, was published by Gollancz in 1997 (it was reviewed favourably by Chris Gilmore in *I/Z* 125), and the sequel is due out from the same publisher imminently. The above is his first fantasy short story.

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# CAUSE & Consequence

*Mary Soon Lee*

I came to Miss Jane Austen as a thief, a hunter after secrets that were not mine to take. A prudent man or an honourable one would never have attempted it. Being sadly deficient in both qualities, I seized the opportunity without a moment's hesitation. Knowing that she would be at the Upper Rooms in Bath on the evening of the tenth of May 1801, I fixed my own arrival for that morning.

The intervening hours passed in a plethora of details: selling one of my diamonds for less conspicuous coinage, securing rooms at the White Hart Hotel, finding a tailor who could conjure me a passable outfit in the scant time available. At length it was evening. I hastened to the Upper Rooms, and stood waiting impatiently for her party to arrive. The ballroom was crowded, the air thick with the perfumes of an hundred females, bedecked in bright muslin frocks and feathered caps, their male companions gay in green and yellow waistcoats. Yet I was assured that this was nothing compared to the height of the Season, when the press of bodies grew almost intolerable.

I paced the room, trying to contain my impatience, searching every face against the portrait of Miss Austen that her sister drew. None seemed to fit. I fought to keep my gaze from the clock: a quarter of nine. Miss Austen's letter declared that she arrived before nine o'clock. Was I in error? Had the letter referred to another evening?

There was a bustle near the entrance. A formidable older lady entered, accompanied by her husband and two young women. A mutter behind me confirmed what I had already guessed: the lady was the redoubtable

Mrs Leigh-Perrot, and the slender figure beside her must be Miss Jane Austen. She was prettier than her portrait suggested, her brown hair falling from her cap in natural curls, her eyes a bright hazel, her face expressive, taking in the scene with lively intelligence.

Lacking any connections who might introduce me to the Leigh-Perrots and thence to Miss Austen, I was reduced to standing nearby in the hope that when the company retired to tea, I might take a seat by their party. I will take Miss Austen's word for it that there was but a single dance before tea was announced. My own attention was so fixed upon the young woman herself that I was oblivious to my surroundings.

To stand within a dozen feet of a woman you have idolized and yet not be allowed to speak to her! The paradox of time that had brought me to this place wrought an intimacy between us that defied natural law. I had delighted in Miss Austen's novels, rekindled that original fascination when I later read the collection of her letters. Yet I could not voice one word of what I knew. No one else in the room, save perhaps Miss Austen herself, had any inkling that she would be honoured centuries later. Of the novels which would bring her such renown, none would be published for a decade.

The crowd moved around me, surging as one toward the tea-room. I slipped in behind Miss Austen's group, close enough to study the tiny blue sprigged pattern on the back of her frock. We arrived at the tea-room. I sat down to the left of Mrs Leigh-Perrot, diagonally opposite to Miss Austen herself. Neither lady spared me more than a passing glance, until a fortuitous opening



allowed me to offer tea to Mrs Leigh-Perrot.

In a minute we were introduced; I gave my name as Mr Radley, son of Viscount Radley of Worcestershire. Mrs Leigh-Perrot focused on me sharply as soon as I mentioned the title. I could see her trying to gauge my clothing more closely, estimating whether such a cravat would belong to the heir or merely a younger son of the Viscount.

She moved one hand upward to command her niece's attention. "Jane, let me introduce to you the Honourable Mr Radley, son of Viscount Radley. Mr Radley, this is my niece, Miss Jane Austen."

Miss Austen looked at me for the first time, a straight, honest look, neither impressed nor intimidated. She nodded. I nodded back. Her uncle, delayed by an acquaintance, arrived just then, and took his seat beside Miss Austen. He was full of talk of his friend, who by all accounts suffered abysmally from the gout. I could have wished his friend dead that his gout might not intrude between Miss Austen and myself. But the moment was past; gout ruled the day, and I took the rest of my tea in silence.

That night the traveller came to me in my hotel room. He stepped out of nothingness like a demon, an icy cold brimming the room at the same instant. "It's over. I've come to take you back."

The traveller's words struck as thunder, shaking me and firing me both together. The blood surged in my face, curled my fingers into fists. "Sir, my task is barely underway. I have yet to uncover those facts about Miss Austen that you seek."

"You fool. You've already ruined it, disturbed the balance enough that the police have noticed. They're on my trail, and my buyer doesn't exist any more – he wasn't even born."

He held out his arm to me, as he had a night ago, a century ahead. The traveller's paradoxes leave me without a reference point to clarify my meaning. He glowered at me. "We need to go. Now."

I thought of what the traveller had said that other night, of how my actions in the past might destroy both the future I belonged to, and the still more remote future that claimed him. Of how he had examined a thousand men before me, seeking one whose *resonance* might be aligned with this era's. He himself could move freely in the 1930s where he found me, yet was powerless here in the 1800s. If he moved so much as the three steps across the carpet to touch me, the unseen machine that held him here would lose its grasp and he would be wrenched back to his own time.

I thought of Miss Austen, and knew then that I cared not one whit for any other future. I held my ground. "Sir, I would stay."

"Don't you understand what you're doing? Are you insane? The balance is collapsing. If you don't come now, you'll be trapped here."

His bluster told me what I needed; he had no power to snatch me back unless I crossed over to him. I laughed. I took the long route round him where he stood, as helpless as a fly in honey. I opened the door. "Good night, sir."

I shut the door behind me. When I returned to my room an hour later, the traveller was gone.

By the next day my confidence had vanished. I alternated between imagining that I would be thrust into the future without warning, and picturing myself unmasked by the very acuity of Miss Austen's intellect. The traveller had provided me with a family name and a pouch of diamonds; he had said that Viscount Radley was a participant in this scheme, that the Viscount's real son was spirited away. But even supposing the Viscount kept to his part, a thousand things could trip me up. I might see a carriage in the street and accidentally name it as a gig when any child would know it for a curricule. I might take the wrong step on the dance floor or mistake the rules of cribbage or speculation.

I need not have feared Miss Austen's keen perceptions in those first days. Eager to see her again, I searched the crowds in the Upper and Lower Rooms every evening, walked past her uncle's house half a dozen times a day, loitered in the Pump Room lest Miss Austen was persuaded into sampling the curative waters. But though I glimpsed her occasionally – walking briskly out of the milliner's, seated across the room at a concert – there was no opportunity to renew my introduction.

A week passed, then a fortnight. Miss Austen's father and her elder sister Cassandra arrived in Bath. The family took their leave of the Leigh-Perrots and set up residence in a comfortable terraced house in Sydney Place. My urgency redoubled. I knew the Austens would shortly leave Bath for a summer holiday and that their journeys would include a stay in Sidmouth. But I must ascertain the details: when they would depart, where else they would travel.

At last one day I entered the Pump Room while Mr Austen and his two daughters were present. The sisters were taking a turn about the room, displaying their fine spotted muslins and their fine figures to equal advantage. The eligible bachelors, however, evinced no conspicuous interest. At 25, Miss Jane Austen was no longer quite young, her sister two years further on the path to spinsterhood. And yet Cassandra's features were fully as regular as the prettiest chit of 18, while Miss Jane Austen's less classical face was rendered the more fascinating by the animated play of her emotions and the sweetness of the smiles she gave to her sister.

Passing by me, Miss Jane Austen inclined her head, enough to show that she remembered our meeting at the Upper Rooms. I bowed back. When the Austens moved to leave, I followed close behind. Outside an unexpected shower threatened to thwart them. Mr Austen put up his umbrella, but it could scarcely shelter himself and his two daughters. The group were on the point of retreating indoors in some consternation, when I stepped forward.

"Sir, if you would let me be of assistance." I bowed and proffered my umbrella. "My name is Mr Radley; I had the pleasure of being introduced to Miss Jane Austen by Mrs Leigh-Perrot some while ago."

Surely it was not my imagination that Miss Jane Austen's cheeks were tinged a deeper pink? I held my breath, wondering if I had been too forward for Mr Austen's tastes.

The retired clergyman evidently decided to view my offer as a gesture more rooted in Christian goodwill



than impudence. He nodded. "Thank you, sir. Normally we would not impose on you, but I promised my wife we would be back soon. I am Mr Austen." He gave his arm to Cassandra, the usual courtesies hastened by the worsening weather. "Cassandra, meet Mr Radley. Mr Radley, this is my eldest daughter, Miss Austen."

A moment more, and I was following behind Cassandra and Mr Austen, holding my umbrella over Miss Jane Austen as I walked between her and the street. Water ran muddy in the gutters, spraying up whenever a carriage clattered past.

"I fear your courtesy will gain you nothing but a badly soaked coat," said Miss Jane Austen, after a passing phaeton splattered me.

"I fear my habits are less elegant than your concern presumes. At home I frequently earn the displeasure of my servants by insisting on walking abroad in the filthiest of weather."

"The place of elegance as a virtue may perhaps be overrated. But I fancy you would not walk in the rain so often did not those same servants remove the burdens of cleaning up afterwards."

"Alas, in the length of a single street you have exposed two flaws in my personality. My want of elegance and inadequate consideration of those it most inconveniences. We must turn the conversation before you discover worse." I looked at her sideways, and caught her likewise looking at me. I might have missed my footing, so lost was I in the interest of this view, had not Miss Jane Austen turned her head away.

"Well then," she declared. "I shall turn the conversation for you. Let me see, I shall begin with the question, How long have you been in Bath?"

"Nearly three weeks. And you?"

"Four. Have you been to the theatre at all?"

"Yes, once to the Theatre Royal." Somewhat guiltily, recalling from my perusal of her letters that she admired the abilities of Robert William Elliston, I added, "I was particularly impressed by Elliston's performance."

"Indeed! I have only seen him once, but he brought a lighthearted naturalness to the role that one rarely finds. On the strength of a single night, I already believe him quite the finest actor in these parts."

Once, she had only seen Elliston perform once. I had remembered reading that she admired him, but of course that knowledge came from the future. It was only now that her family had moved to Bath that Miss Jane Austen would have occasion to frequent the plays at Orchard Street. Agitated by my mistake, thankful that it would not be apparent to anyone else, I gracefully asked the question that weighed on my mind. "Will your family be spending the summer in Bath, Miss Austen?"

"No, sir." Faint disapproval sounded in her voice.

"Then I need not fear that leaving this city will deprive me of your company. Should I have stayed, I would only have suffered the same disappointment by another means."

She took a dozen steps before replying. This time there was no denying the flush that stained her cheeks. "Sir, you do not know my family well enough to warrant any regret at our departure."

Her quiet level tone rebuked me as effectively as her

words. I could not press her for more information. Though for the remainder of the walk I confined my remarks to the weather and the state of the roads, still Miss Austen answered only in monosyllables. Each undecorated "Yes" or "No" confirmed her disapproval.

We reached Sydney Place in equal ill humour. I escorted Miss Austen to the front door of the Austen's house. Mr Austen thanked me; I made some vacuous reply.

Miss Jane Austen paused at the threshold. She turned to look at me, and some confusion or regret showed in her face. "Thank you."

Her tone was warm, cordial. So simply she displaced my bad mood, so simply she stepped indoors before I could answer. I walked outside another hour, and still when I returned to the hotel my thoughts were full of Miss Jane Austen.

A prolific letter-writer, the larger part of Miss Austen's correspondence was burned after her death by her sister Cassandra, who sought to preserve her sister's reputation. To this end, Cassandra destroyed every letter that was too personal or too caustic. Some 140 letters survived this pruning, but not a single one from the summer of 1801 until the autumn of 1804.

The traveller had sent me to spy on Miss Austen in an effort to unravel the secrets of those silent years. And though the traveller had vanished, I had my own reasons for continuing to seek out Miss Austen.

So I moved to Sidmouth, and waited impatiently for the Austens to arrive. I spent my days pacing along the promenade, across the windswept commons, down to the harbour where the fishing boats rocked in the water, the briny smell soaking into everything.

One afternoon while I strode in the sea-air, I saw three people head toward me, an elder woman framed by two younger ones. My breath caught as I recognized the Austen daughters. The threesome approached, both daughters nodded to me, I tipped my hat in return.

"Mama," said Cassandra Austen, "let me introduce to you the Honourable Mr Radley, the gentleman who escorted us back from the Pump Room when it rained. Mr Radley, this is my mother, Mrs Austen."

We began the usual round of courtesies. Had I been to Sidmouth before? No, but I liked its situation, between the rolling hills and the seashore. Did Mrs Austen come here often?

Cassandra Austen was politely encouraging, her mother more so. Miss Jane Austen herself said rather less, but her eyes and the brief agitation of her fingers smoothing down her frock spoke for her.

I matched my steps to theirs, and together we strolled along agreeably. Mrs Austen paused to watch the sea, and Cassandra stopped close by her. A little gap separated myself and Miss Jane Austen from the others. "Sir," she said just loud enough for me to catch her words over the crash of the waves. "I wish to apologize for my rudeness the other day. I thought, perhaps incorrectly, that your flattery was idle and insincere. And yet I was not certain..."

She ended on a questioning note. Elegant speeches fled me as I turned to see the salt breeze lift her brown curls to lie against her white bonnet. "The fault was mine. Never believe that I think too little of you,



madam, but rather too much. My tongue cannot express, civility does not permit me, to say what I would wish to."

Above us a seagull glided, mated to the wind's current. Miss Austen smiled at me properly for the first time, and the sweetness of that scene is with me now, the curve of her lips, the sea-damp air tugging at her muslin frock. One perfect moment stolen before Mrs Austen crossed over to us.

That night I woke abruptly, jarred from nightmare by a bitter cold. I thought the window must have been blown open, but the curtains were still, nothing stirred. I lay awake for some hours, unable to shake a vague uneasiness.

The next day I again met the Austens near the shore, and the day after that, and the day after that, until it settled into a ritual, accepted but never formalized. I refused to consider history. I refused to consider consequences.

Sometimes either Mrs Austen or Cassandra would be absent. On one occasion Mr Austen joined us. Miss Jane Austen came every day.

She was quiet but never timid. She gave her opinions forthrightly, with a keen wit that sometimes crossed into sarcasm. Without foreknowledge I would never have guessed her to be one of the great English authors. On the one hand, she didn't seem introverted enough to nourish hidden genius. On the other hand, she lacked the simplicity that would bespeak an unalloyed virtue. Beneath what she said, I heard her resentment of the family's move from the shire where she grew up, from the friends she loved, to Bath. There was no doubt she was conscious of her own uncertain position as a woman with no fortune who finds herself several years past the best age to seek a husband.

But my expectations were redundant beside the woman herself. She was intelligent, thoughtful, her hazel eyes eloquent, her hand so strangely precious the first time I pressed it in mine. We were facing the sea, Mrs Austen and Cassandra sitting at a comfortable distance.

"I have written to my father, Miss Austen, to advise him I am in danger of becoming irretrievably entangled with a woman of uncommon charm. If I have advanced too rapidly, tell me now."

"I cannot lie to you. You have leapt ahead of both propriety and rationality, yet I would wish you quicker still."

"Then will you do me the honour, Miss Austen, of accepting my proposal of marriage?"

"Mr Radley," she said with a stern expression, "I accept."

And then she smiled, and the sun reflected in a thousand glimmers of light from the waves, and the seagulls hung rapt in the deep, deep blue above.

"I shall speak to your father when he returns from London this weekend." I took her hand. She pressed her fingers against mine, the sweetest warmth I ever felt.

Two days later, the day before Mr Austen was expected to return, I received a note. The paper was folded over and over into a tiny square. When I opened it up a slip fell out, cut from the page of a book. At the top someone had added in red: "Encyclopedia Britannica, 14th

edition, 1929."

"Austen, Jane," the entry read, "born Dec. 16, 1775, Steventon, Hampshire, England, died July 30, 1805, Kidderminster, Worcester. Minor English writer who had completed one novel and left early drafts of two others upon her death at age 29. The finished novel, *Northanger Abbey*, is a burlesque parody of the Gothic style, enriched by a timeless mastery of the prose medium, that touches on the broader social issues of her age. Married Henry Radley, later Viscount Radley, in 1802; died in childbirth."

I crumpled the entry without reading further, cast it into the embers of last night's fire – to say she died in childbirth in 1805, barely four years from now – I could not believe it – I *would* not believe it. The traveller must have faked the note to suit his purpose. The paper crinkled in front of me. The blackened edges fell inward to join the ashes.

Even if the entry were accurate, it only described a possible future, not a necessary one – if history were so fragile, I could change it again. And yet, of all the things that I might risk, this one, this woman's life, I could not chance.

Another line of red handwriting turned in the heat. I pulled the paper out with my bare hand, stamped the sparks down, spread the sheet out with my good hand.

"If you would restore the balance of history, go to the harbour at one o'clock tonight."

The traveller came in silence, bringing an icy cold that has never left me since that night. He snatched me back to my world and out of hers. He told me that he dropped a body into the salt water that night, a body that resembled mine in shape and form, created by some infernal machine.

I pray to God that she did not miss me long, that she has found her peace in the better world that she deserves.

As for myself, I have not earned that rest. I went to her as a thief, a hunter after secrets that were not mine to take, and I will forever be haunted by the memory of a woman with hazel eyes.

**Note:** Cassandra Austen did indeed censor the majority of Jane Austen's letters, and though almost 150 have survived, none date from the period between June 1801 and September 1804. Reports from family members strongly suggest that Jane Austen formed an attachment to a gentleman sometime during this period, but that it ended tragically when the gentleman died. During this interval, Jane Austen also received a marriage proposal from another gentleman, a Mr Harris Bigg-Wither, which she first accepted then declined the very next morning; there is no indication, however, that she was ever romantically attached to Mr Bigg-Wither.

**Mary Soon Lee** has published three previous stories in *Interzone* – "Assembly Line" (issue 98), "The Tinkerbelt Theory" (issue 102) and "The Day Before They Came" (issue 133). Of Irish-Chinese parentage, and born and raised in England, she now lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



# A Servant of Satan

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## A Gothic Tale

*Darrell Schweitzer*

*Her lips suck forth my soul; see where it flies! –  
Dr Faustus, Sc. XIII.*

1

Understand that this happened a long time ago, and that, terrible though some parts may be, it is a preposterous story. The early part of my native century was a suitable setting for preposterous stories. I mean the years immediately after the usurper Bonaparte had been safely shuffled off to St. Helena, when a profoundly longed-for peace settled over an exhausted Europe, and the Dark Satanic Mills of industrialism had yet to cloud the skies. Then was an interval for beauty and, indeed, for such recreational horrors as the mind could conjure up in fancy. So Young Werther sorrowed, and the rest of us pretended to, we who were young, at least, who had escaped the cataclysm by the mere chance of being a few years short of military age at the time of Waterloo.

Yes, it was the season for “Monk” Lewis and his kind, for Mrs Shelley’s lurching creature, for castle-spectres and similar shrieking delights. We, the pampered children, to whom twenty years of war and hardship were but nursery tales, could further outrage our parents by professing to admire the excesses of Lord Byron and his circle, which so shocked decent society.

Titus Cunningham and I were of that time. The

world was ours. In the first bloom of early manhood, he chose me to be his travelling companion for a tour of the pacified Continent, and of course I was delighted to go.

We had but to maintain appearances. Cunningham’s father was a certain Lord Bromley, who had been a spectacular wastrel in his own day, a member of the Hellfire Club, and an intimate of the Prince Regent back when the royal son had inspired so many desperate prayers for the recovery of George the Third. It was even whispered that the younger Cunningham’s parentage was questionable. But no one challenged it. There wasn’t enough the inheritance to be worth challenging. Indeed, the joke went that the Bromley tenants consisted of a band of Gypsies and a dozen sheep, and after the Gypsies stole the sheep, Lord Bromley was somewhat embarrassed for resources.

I was the one with money in the purse, the third son of a successful wool merchant, of wretchedly undistinguished background. As I had displayed no talent for accounts and ledgers, my father was glad to be rid of me for a while.

So off we went, only by the remotest stretch of the imagination qualified for the company we kept; but my friend had his name and certain letters of introduction, which sufficed. We came to Paris, not yet the glittering capital of the Second Empire, but a city whose natural



gaiety was almost subdued from the generation-long catastrophe of Revolution and Bonapartism.

Still, a fat and stupid Bourbon dozed on the French throne and Paris had its charms, in the bright and brilliant spring.

We took the usual tours expected of young gentlemen: the Louvre, Notre Dame, the Tuileries (which was still standing then); but Cunningham and I were drawn, by mutual inclination, to the benighted, still-medieval parts of the city, where barbarous houses leaned fantastically out over the chilly, damp alleys to block out the sun, and one might hope to discover that alchemists laboured mysteriously in cluttered cellars, their search for worldly riches being like shadows cast in Plato's cave, but hinting at some gnostic quest for inner, mystical truth.

Suffice it to say that most of our amusements were harmless, even educational antiquarianism. We sought out strange carvings above doorways, in shadowy churchyards, and laughed at their hideousness. Titus made sketches of them, of great artistic merit.

Some guardian spirit preserved our innocence, even one midnight when we came upon an especially squalid dwelling which seethed with unwholesome light and with the sounds of evil revelry. My friend made bold to knock on the door. The place was a brothel. A painted, dishevelled woman came to the door, exclaimed, "Why! You're just a child!" and slammed the door in his face. For indeed the future Lord Bromley was one of those young men of slight stature, soft feature, and fumbling demeanour to whom adolescence seems to cling.

It was innocent, too, I say, when we entered the foul-smelling shop of a decrepit Jew and acquired an certain ancient, black-lettered book which the Jew seemed glad to be rid of, but which to Titus was no more than a new toy. That very same night we two repaired to the rooftop above our apartment, lit black candles, and performed certain rites, hoping to conjure out of the warm and blossom-scented air we knew not what winged monstrosities.

But things became by degrees less innocent when we met the "Countess" Sophie-Marie Devereaux. My friend made the connection, perhaps whispering some name from his father's glory days. Somehow we found ourselves one evening at a glittering ball, in a palatial chateau just outside the city. I certainly felt out of place among the uniforms, the ladies in sweeping gowns, and the silken-clad exquisites, all of whom were waited on by servants in liveries which had not changed since the time of Louis XV. But if anyone made jests at our expense, my friend ignored them and I probably failed to understand, as my French was weak anyway.

We didn't care. Soon Cunningham stood completely fixated on the striking figure of a woman about our own age, tall with amazingly dark eyes, with skin as pale and smooth as marble, with perfect, raven-black hair and the demeanour of an empress. Certainly the other young men swarmed about her thick as starlings, even a couple of bemedalled chaps who, I was given to understand, were of (or close to) the royal house of Bourbon.

We could only watch from afar.

"Oh! She is a *goddess!*" exclaimed my friend. "I must come to know her!"

Thus was Romeo smitten by the first sight of Juliet.

I have to admit that my heart stopped, too, at the sight of her.

Thus Faustus glimpsed Helen. The door to Hell opened, just a crack, and that was enough.

"You must help me!" said Titus.

"But what can *I* do?"

He gazed down at his feet and said very softly. "Perhaps nothing, friend Peter, and so I shall die of despair."

But instead he lingered for hours gazing at the object of his desire with an expression on his face that would have done Young Werther proud, until at last I could bear no more of this and was desperate enough to drag him away bodily if I had to – and then a miracle happened. One of the liveried servants offered my friend a little piece of paper on a silver tray.

He read what was written thereon and passed from my side, drifting through the dancing, swaying figures like a ghost in a dream, dazzled and amazed. I could only watch in wonder as the circle around the lady opened to admit him, her hand extended for his kiss, and she whispered something into his ear.

He returned to me at once.

"Ashbury, we've got to go."

"Now?"

"Yes. There's something I have to do."

We motioned a servant for our cloaks and left, though the festivities were still in progress (hours past midnight), and it was only as we two walked on a deserted path along the Seine that Cunningham told me what was required of him.

"She wants you to do *what?*"

He repeated the injunction. "It is a test," said he. "She wants me to prove that I love her."

"But you've only just met her!"

"Still, I am certain with all my heart that I love her."

There was no dissuading him. Passion far overruled sense. I could only follow along helplessly, arguing, until at last he whirled and faced me, furious to the point of madness, his anger half-concealing his very palpable fear.

"If you are my friend, you will help me! If not, I bid you farewell forever!"

Like a knight on a quest, he was ready to risk all for his lady's trifling whim.

"Couldn't she have sent you to slay a dragon? It would have been so much simpler."

"Do not joke with me!" he screamed. His voice broke, and he seemed like a hopeless little boy, and I, as his friend, felt more than anything else a need to protect him.

"All right," I said. "I'm coming."

Our mission was to invade a certain ancient graveyard and steal the skull of a sainted bishop, who had been martyred some thirty years earlier for his unstinting loyalty to the ancient regime.

We had to steal pick and shovel first, but we managed, and acquired a crowbar in the process, which proved useful as we pried open, first the gates of the cemetery, then the door to the bishop's spired and vaulted tomb.

The marble slab covering the coffin within proved a far more difficult proposition, and as we grunted as sweated by flickering lantern-light, our shadows cast like dancing demons against the walls, I paused and remarked, "I don't think it is my calling to be a resurrection man."



Young Cunningham gave me an exasperated look and said nothing. We kept on working. The slab started to give way.

"Ah, our friend here, the bishop –" He wiped his brow, and continued labouring, and spoke between gasps. "– will provide us with a but trifle, for my lady's favour, an object for which he, being in heaven, can have no further use."

Now that Titus seemed to be joking about the matter, I felt a certain relief, for what had begun as an obsession, bordering on madness, was now an *adventure*, a scene worth retelling in a dozen Gothic novels; but the adventure became a dangerous obsession again when the police arrived.

I heard dogs outside, and French voices, shouting.

We had almost moved the slab aside. I could see the gilded coffin-lid below.

I seized my friend and struggled to draw him away. "Come away!"

He was in tears now. He clawed at the stone with his bare hands. "I can't! Help me! Help me!"

"Forget this! Come!"

But he would not leave, and I could not abandon him. The only recourse was in one more, mighty heave that sent the slab to the floor with such a crash that our discoverers must have stood paralyzed at the sheer terror of the sound. That is the only way Titus could have had the time to smash open the coffin with a shovel, to reach in and seize the prize; that was how we got sufficient head start to run for dear life, abandoning tools, hats, cloaks, bags, my friend clinging to his precious relic as we leapt over tombstones and scaled the outer wall of the cemetery, with shots fired behind us, hounds virtually at our heels.

But we got away. Safe again in the darkness, we both broke into the laughter of hysterical release. Then solemn, drifting once again like a soundless ghost, my friend made his way back to that great house where the ball had been held, and I could only follow. Now the guests were departed and the lights low. We went to a small, back door. A single servant, who had been carefully instructed, led us along an unlighted corridor, up a spiral staircase and into a great chamber. Thus we arrived once more, tattered and muddy, my friend limping from where he had hurt his knee during the leap over the cemetery wall, into the presence of the Countess Sophie-Marie Devereaux, she of the unknown peerage, whose name and title were never questioned because her mere existence bewitched all who beheld her into total acceptance.

The chamber, too, was without illumination, but for a single candle, in the glow of which the lady's face seemed to float like an apparition. There, reverently, Titus Cunningham laid his prize before her on a marble table, and in that instant, I am certain, not during the commission of our crime, but *at that instant*, all innocence was lost, for both of us.

On following nights – always at night – we followed that stolen skull into the company of the Countess and her most select intimates. I cannot hope to describe what followed. Whether she actually was a countess, or a courtesan, it mattered not; her manner was that of an infernal queen, as she presided over the most amazing orgies, touching and tearing flesh and soul and sense

in ways I had never thought possible in wildest delirium. She posed naked with that skull in impossibly suggestive poses, while painters tried to record her wantonness on canvases kept either closely guarded or burned, while a sculptor, unable to capture the essence of this latter-day Salome in stone, ripped out his own throat with his chisel and died in her arms; while she sang an exquisite song of death and paused between verses to drink of the sculptor's blood.

We all drank of that blood, mixed with wine and opium, when we held our first black mass in an underground vault. The supposed countess lay naked on the altar – nay, she *was* the altar, offering up her flesh to every obscenity while the impaled head of a black goat, on a stake nearby, looked on. By some trick of reflected candlelight, the goat's eyes seemed to fill with fire. Someone even cried out, "Look! It's alive!" but the Countess merely laughed, and moans and sighs of pleasure mingled with screams, as the whip or the hot iron might as readily replaced the caressing hand or the hungry mouth in the heaving darkness.

Often I feared I would die, there in that darkness, amid the faceless sea of anonymous, perfumed bodies that writhed over one another like a great mass of serpents; but even death, there, could be ecstasy, and that made it all the more terrifying.

I cannot justify myself. I cannot begin to understand how such things went on and on, how Titus and I, who were little more than boys on a schoolboy outing when this started, stained ourselves with every kind of filth. In a former time we could have claimed that Satan had worked his miracles through the Countess Sophie-Marie Devereaux and her minions, that we were as ensnared by her as is the victim of a cobra by the serpent's awful dance.

I cannot claim, in truth, that the eyes of the black goat were ever more than carrion, or that the cries in the vault were ever more than human sounds; nor did the uncertain light cast any shadows but our own. Any demons summoned arose within our own minds.

I could feebly argue that a supernatural agency needed no showy stagecraft, no fireworks and claps of thunder, no masks suddenly removed or put on, no monsters rising out of trapdoors; that the mere *presence* of such a being was enough to work all its malevolent magic.

I am left with mute incomprehension.

Yet I could not leave my friend's side, and we two existed like craven addicts for whom waking is but a hideous, lifeless interval between the false paradise of opium dreams.

That was our education. That was what we learned on our tour of the Continent.

Then it ended as suddenly as it had begun. One night the Countess led the two of us out onto a balcony, alone, where we regarded the City and the lands all about and the night sky. I could only think of that passage in St. Luke's Gospel in which Christ is taken up to the mountain top and the Devil says that he will give over all the kingdoms of the world if only the Saviour would abandon his mission and fall down and worship evil.

I was so much afraid. I had already fallen down, and abased myself utterly. What more could be asked of me?

I glanced at Titus. He was as afraid as I.

The Countess seemed to know our thoughts. She



laughed. "All I ask is that you follow me in a flight of fancy." Of course we were her slaves. We would follow her anywhere.

"Fancy..." I managed to utter.

"Yes, in fancy, let us speak of a race of beings, immortals, who have come down to this earth from the stars countless ages ago. They are older than history. They are older than Adam. They have the power to assume pleasing shapes and to mould the passions of men as a sculptor moulds clay. To pass the tedious millennia these creatures find it diverting to mould human lives into painful and absurd shapes. But of course the victims are only clay, so their masters care not at all what happens to them."

She turned first to me and said, "What do you think of my fancy?"

I managed to reply, "I think such creatures would be true demons indeed, utterly evil."

"Because of their absolute heartlessness?"

"Yes, precisely for that reason."

Titus stammered, then broke in. "Do you mean... is Satan one of these creatures?"

She afforded him a quick, sharp expression, almost a grimace. "It would be possible for one of them to assume such a role, if it amused him to do so. Imagine that all the world's demonologies, all the world's religions with their wars and terrors and inquisitions, have been created merely for sport."

Now my mind was racing. There were hidden meanings here, layer upon layer, as in an ancient grimoire with locked covers. I desperately wanted the key. This was no mere fancy. It was a revelation, a *command* –

She held out both her hands. She hooked her index fingers under our chins and dragged us, like fish caught on a line, to the edge of the balcony. We would have leapt over to our deaths if she had so desired it. Instead, we leaned there, looking out at Paris.

She pushed our chins up. "No, look at the stars. Think of the dark and haunted planets of other suns. Ask yourself, could this fancy be true?" Then she put her face near to ours and whispered, "What if the ancient monster from the sky has lost interest in you, and discards you as a child does an old toy? Can it be true?"

She let go of our chins, whirled about, gave us her most exquisite, impossibly innocent, girlish smile, and vanished indoors.

Such was our dismissal. In the secret vaults beneath the city, in abandoned, desecrated graveyards, no one waited for us. When we next came to the chateau by the Seine, unfamiliar servants insisted that they did not know the name of Countess Sophie-Marie Devereaux, and that certainly there was no such person among the nobility of France.

For the longest time, my friend wept and raged. He said, "What's the use of living, now? Why don't I hurl myself from a window and be damned, for I am surely damned already?"

I could not answer him. I could only ask myself over and over, *Can it be true?*

And as if he could read my thoughts, he said to me more than once, "I think her cruelty makes her even more desirable. I think she is still testing us. I will have her back, no matter what it takes."

At the time, I was in no state to consider the impli-

cations of those words. It was the beginning, not the end of a soul-devouring obsession. I could not even begin to imagine where it would eventually lead.

Right now, it was as if we two had awakened from a vile and alluring dream, trembling with dread and self-loathing, desperately hoping that none of it had actually happened, for all neither of us had the courage to put such a hope into words.

And so, with nothing else to do, we returned to England, and parted in silence. I, at least, was afraid to go back to my family. I retreated to a series of squalid London garrets. There I took to drink, to silence the voice of the Siren, who came to me every night for all I might weep and rave and beg her to go away, whose light footstep I heard so often in the narrow hall behind me, or climbing the stairs, whose soft caress made me wake up screaming in the dark.

All this while I could not even speak the name of my friend. I did not dare write to him.

I supported myself writing Gothic novels, which of course I did not sign, for they were wretched, vulgar jokes disguised as horrors, sufficient only to titillate the masses with hints of things they *could not* imagine. I could only linger, survive, and wait for the memories to recede, as even nightmares do.

Then the spirit left me. The appetite for fancies faded completely. I returned home.

## 2

It was in the winter of 185– that I received the following note:

*Ashbury, my old friend –*

*Come at once. Share with me the consummation of all my labours and dreams.*

*– Titus, Lord Bromley*

Directions followed at the bottom of the paper, and then the writer had scrawled, "SHE is here!"

The thing struck me like a blow. That was a lifetime and a universe ago. I had, against all likelihood, succeeded in business. I was an entirely respectable widower well into middle-age, with a grown son serving Her Majesty in India.

Though I seldom drank any more, I called the butler to bring me a glass of sherry, which I sipped as I sat for hours by a dying fire, pondering and afraid, fumbling to formulate some course of action, other than the most obvious one, which would have been to toss the note into the fire and forget about it.

*My old friend*, the new Lord Bromley had written. Here was a sheeted, shrieking phantom from my past, a chain-rattling horror of the sort I no longer enjoyed.

But we had been friends once.

Now he had swung the door to Hell open wide, and merely asked me, out of friendship, to step through.

*She is here*, he had written.

As I have said, this is a preposterous story, and it is therefore preposterously fitting that I left all I had built up in the world, my mills and factories, my fine house and lands, and secretly, by night, travelled under an assumed name, alone and carrying my own luggage. I don't think friendship had anything to do with it.



*She is here.*

I had hours to attempt to deny my folly as I came by degrees into a singularly barren and depressing part of the country, which I never would have believed existed in this day and age; as I neared the Bromley estates and passed through fields where surely no hand had tilled the soil since the days of the Black Death. At the last wretched, impoverished inn, when I let slip whither I was bound, the landlord angrily cast me out into the rain and the night, proclaiming that he wouldn't have "none of your heathen kind" in his establishment.

So it was that I walked the last five miles or so, miserable and exhausted in the cold, until I came to the centre of that Waste Land of barbarous myth, where a wounded knight might be expected to dwell in his accursed castle, waiting for his saviour to come at last.

But I did not feel like any saviour, though the vast and depressing expanse of Bromley Manor had every appearance of being accursed. The façade of the walls was visibly cracked. Many of the windows were shuttered or even boarded up. Clutching vines grew everywhere, so that in places the house had more the appearance of a wild hillside than a dwelling built by man.

I knocked on the door in the darkness, my teeth chattering. The rain fell harder, soaking through my supposedly waterproof cloak.

I pounded with my stick and trembled, muttering "Come on man! For the love of God! Come on!" If ever there was a night to "catch your death," this was it.

At last the door swung open and I all but tumbled inside, relieved of my luggage and directed by an apparition of grotesque visage and proportions, which my eyes and dazed brain gradually resolved into a dark-faced and possibly hump-backed giant, a Moor or Hindu, who held in his hand before his gleaming black eyes not a lantern or candle, but a *taper*, and looked for all the world like some *djinn* summoned out of a bottle. There had been a time when I would have appreciated such details, but now I was beyond caring. I let the fellow carry my bag and lead me into the musty, damp depths of Bromley Manor. He said, of course, not a word. I could well imagine that his vocal cords had been cut.

And so I found myself in a vast hall, beneath the heraldic accumulation of generations of Lords Bromley, seated across a polished table from the current bearer of the title, my old friend.

The servant left us alone. My host offered me sherry, which I took gladly, to warm myself.

For a moment, neither of us spoke, and I had time to observe how much Titus Cunningham had changed. He certainly no longer looked like a schoolboy. Age, or the ravages of his excesses, had done their worst. Where I was now portly and grey-bearded, but otherwise sound, Titus had the aspect of some wizened dwarf from out of one of my Gothic novels. He stooped, his head bobbing maddeningly on his thin neck. There were, I think, wattles beneath his chin, for all the round, soft flesh of his face had so melted away that he scarcely seemed to have a chin. One noticed his eyes, huge and round and staring, and his high, pock-marked forehead made all that much larger as his scraggly hairline retreated in patches back past his ears. When he rose to get more sherry, he displayed an odd gait which seemed to suggest the onset of a palsy. When he sat down again, I saw that his teeth

were broken and dark. I regret to say that he stank. His dressing gown was stained and threadbare.

"Are you... well?" he asked *me*, without any apparent irony.

I related to him the broad outline of my life, and noted, much to my distress, that when I told of my marriage to the very conventional woman who became my bride, he actually *hissed* with a sudden, startled intake of breath, and clutched the arms of his chair, as if he were *offended* that my affections could ever be so diverted. When I came to her death, he relaxed, which appalled me.

I was famished after my long walk, as I had been heaved out of the inn without any supper. He rose and with his own hands served me an adequate, if cold repast.

As I ate he began to tell me of his own life, of all that had happened since we had returned from Paris. I had thought our friendship at an end, then, but he had not. No, he said, he had been preparing for the time when he had completed certain labours, and could send for me again, to *resume where we had left off*. In the years since our trip to Paris, he had sojourned among the Rosicrucian orders in all parts of the world, for all he turned from them in disgust when he found their secrets a sham, like paper and tinsel pretending to be treasure. No occult society existed which could satisfy him, and therefore he had created his own, very much in imitation of that circle surrounding Countess Marie-Sophie Devereaux, for it was his relentless purpose to *attract her to him*. As a bright light draws a moth, so too a demoness (for so he now imagined her) could be drawn to a blazing fire of sufficient evil.

Of course most of the people who came to him were mere degenerates. They came to *take* and had nothing to offer. He was soon done with them.

"I am like a miner," he said, "in the wilderness of America's California, panning for gold... most is dross. One tosses it back into the river."

There had been deaths: someone hurled from the tower of a ruined castle overlooking the Rhine; another found with his throat slit, in Sicily. Several more became inmates in lunatic asylums. One had splattered his brains on the walls of his cell, somehow surviving long enough to paint with his fingers, in his own gore, a recognizable image of Sophie-Marie Devereaux.

I listened to all this, sick at heart. I could not believe my friend a murderer, but I could believe that he was diseased in his mind. I could well understand, and yes, to a point, *sympathize* with his disease; but still there is a terror at being alone in a dark house, miles from anywhere, with a madman. Therefore I was glad of a precaution I had taken. On my journey, my fear had been of robbery, for I was far from the well-travelled routes, and so I had secreted two loaded pistols under my waistcoat. It was reassuring to feel them there now.

"But what of this Countess?" I challenged at last. "I imagine she's quite fat and rather ugly by now —"

At that my host went into a screaming frenzy. He reached over and swept the remains of my dinner onto the floor with a crash. He hauled me out of my seat before I could even think of reaching for my pistols; and he shook me as if I were a straw dummy, for all I was by far the larger man. I knew then that everything I'd heard about the strength of madmen was true, and that Titus Cunningham was indeed mad, as he shook me thus and



sputtered into my face, his foul breath choking me.

"I tell you *I have seen her!* She has not changed at all!"

I tried to calm him. I took hold of his hands, and tried to make him release me.

"So, you've seen her. How... wonderful. Exciting. I long to see her again myself."

He let go of me again and sat down. "I don't doubt that you do."

What frightened me then was that I actually meant what I said. I felt that same longing stirring within me, like a serpent unwinding from its slumber. The eternal question stirred within me once more. *Could it be true?* I thought of that night on the balcony in France, of the Countess's ranging fancy, of the possibility that beautiful, immortal creatures from the stars had dwelt among mankind from the beginning of time, to be our masters, our tormentors, our demons and gods.

"Is she, here, now? In this house?"

He eyed me cannily, as if he thought I were trying to trick him.

"Sometimes. Somewhat."

"Titus," I said with a sigh. "I trust you are still my friend, and I don't have to call you My Lord... I trust that if you have summoned me all this way under such circumstances to reveal whatever it is you're going to reveal, I trust... that you will confide in me."

"Yes," he said. "I must do at least that much. *She* comes to me almost every night now, in my dreams."

"In your... dreams?"

I wanted to be able to pity him, whose life had been shipwrecked on the delusions of his dreams. But I could not be sure. What of *my* dreams? What of my memories which now came pouring back out of the darkness into which I had thought I had banished them?

"*She* is very close," said Titus Cunningham. "I can sense her presence all the time now. In dreams, she comes to me and touches me, and tells me what has to be done. Soon, she will be among us in the flesh, in her perfect and exquisite and, yes, unaging flesh. She will make those who worship her young again too, and immortal. That is the culmination of my design, friend Ashbury. That is why I have summoned you here. I found, in the end, that there was no one I could share this with, except you."

"Yes," I said, feeling a sense of doom as I spoke. "It must be with me."

He stood up.

"It is time to go," he said.

In that instant, I would have followed him into the very mouth of Hell.

Possibly that was what he had in mind. He stared into my eyes, as if to say, *You feel it too, don't you?*

It was as if the Countess Sophie-Marie Devereaux, who had the power to shape minds and dreams like so much clay, had never let go of me. Now it was the second half of my life, the respectable part, which was the dream from which I had suddenly awakened, in terror.

The huge, mute servant appeared like something conjured. He draped Lord Bromley in a cloak too large for him and provided another for me, which was, thankfully, waterproof and dry.

Dumbly, I let the servant place the cloak on me, but then I exclaimed, "You cannot seriously suggest going

outside, on this night, *in this weather* –" I knew it was a feeble remonstrance.

"We have to, friend Peter. On tonight of all nights. It is a special night, a feast-night celebrated on no liturgical calendar, I assure you, but a festival nonetheless. This night we honour Lilith, she who was the forbidden first wife of Adam, and remains, in our dreams, mistress to us all."

I was exhausted and cold and not at all eager to go wandering about the windswept moorlands in the company of a – nay, of *two* madmen. (For I saw that the servant was likewise dressed to come with us.) Or perhaps it was three, numbering myself among them.

I paused at the threshold.

"If I hadn't been expelled from the inn," I said, "I would have spent the night there and arrived tomorrow morning. Then what would that have done to your precious feast of whoever it is?"

"I assure you," said my friend, "that the forces which guide us have ways of securing these things. It is *because* you were needed here tonight that the innkeeper was compelled to cast you out. Thus does the Fate measure out our thread. But, co'me! We must depart, this instant!"

The servant stood on one side of me, Lord Bromley on the other. Their posture was clearly threatening. They would haul me along if they had to. I wondered, idly, if bullets could stop such creatures, but I kept my head about me, held my hands up as if to say, *Never mind. You don't have to use force. I'm coming*, and so kept my pistols a continued secret.

Thus did I rationalize. Thus did I pretend, to myself, to be in control.

I went, into the howling storm, exactly as I had feared, trooping across the wintry moors in the company of madmen, far from any light or house, headed I knew not where.

Sleet mixed with snow. The wind was a tearing, frigid blast. I felt a cold fire burning in my chest and I struggled to keep up with my companions. In time we had to link arms and form a chain – with Titus leading, propelling us all on with his madman's strength – merely so that we would not lose one another.

If I called out, I couldn't make myself heard. Therefore, I was in effect alone, and had time yet again to ask myself if I really believed that I was being taken to meet (or conjure) the immortal and supernally beautiful Countess Sophie-Marie or what ever her true name was; or whether I was merely to be obscurely murdered by two maniacs whose mania was terribly, compellingly contagious.

Snatches of my friend's conversation came back to me. *Great good comes through great evil*, he had claimed in the course of his tirade. A sophomoric absurdity. *She transcends life itself*, he said. Well, maybe, but we were going to freeze to death first. *She comes in dreams*.

Yes, in dreams.

From this point on, and I cannot promise that I accurately relate what followed. I can only give it as I *perceived* it, but my imagination filled in the details, or tried to, transforming the huge, upstanding stones we came upon in the darkness into a circle of yammering demons.

But no, there were only stones, and the wind.

We made some sort of ritual circuit around the stones, then came to a place I all but expected, to a roof-



less, long-abandoned abbey. Now many wealthy noblemen have thought it fashionable to *build* medieval ruins on their property, where they can sit and brood on the transience of all things – but Titus, Lord Bromley, was by no means rich, and this abbey was genuine, its chapel once consecrated to the saints, but now befouled, and turned to an infinitely darker purpose.

The chapel itself was set into a hillside and partially underground. It still possessed enough of a roof and door to shelter us somewhat from the storm. The servant lit candles, providing enough light for me to see that the place was a black shrine, a veritable museum of depravity, adored with obscene statues, with huge, gilded phalli garlanded with dead flowers. There were paintings of indescribable horror set up – in them I recognized my friend's unmistakable hand and wasted genius – and all manner of cabalistic symbols carved into the floor and walls. Here stolen gravestones had been set up in a circle, mimicking the standing stones outside. In the centre was what might have been a holy altar once, now stained with offerings.

It must have taken years, and the entire remnants of the Bromley fortune, to assemble all this.

"This is all for you, Peter," said my friend.

Even in the cold, the place stank. Something I mercifully could not make out clearly, long dead, hung from the rafters behind the altar.

Titus, in a state of feverish excitement, opened a trunk and lovingly removed and placed upon the altar two objects which I, with utter despair in my heart, immediately recognized.

One was the black book that we had purchased from the Jew in Paris. The other, now bejewelled and encased in gold like a precious relic of ancient times, was the skull of the French bishop.

I wept for my friend then, because I saw that he had utterly failed to assume an adult station in life. Instead he had retreated, fixating on our schoolboy fancies until they had become an all-engulfing insanity.

And what of myself?

I quoted aloud, more for my own benefit than anyone else's, "*and when I became a man, I put aside childish things.*"

Titus stood before me, a wild gleam in his eye.

"Then be childish again, Peter. One last time."

"We might as well be childish forever."

He looked at me with a gleam in his eye that much disquieted me. "Yes. That's good. Forever."

Here is what seems a dream: Yes, the servant stationed himself by the door to prevent my escape, but I was not compelled by any threat of force. When Titus began a ritual I knew all too well, easily I reverted to my former ways as if we were both still a year or so shy of twenty, and living in Paris.

We played our games with bones, with blasphemies and black books and candlesticks. In the cold, we knelt down and prayed to Satan, to Lilith, to Astoreth, Astarte, Shub-Niggurath, and a thousand other demons, and Titus spoke to them quite tenderly and familiarly, as if having a cordial conversation with welcome, if invisible guests.

And I thought of the dark and haunted worlds of other suns, and wondered if it could all be true.

It was merely odd, an irritation, that when Titus

paused to listen to replies, I heard only the wind.

I was here to comfort my friend, I tried to tell myself. This was a schoolboy prank after all, I wanted to say.

But I was such a poor liar, even to myself.

I broke away. I shouted.

"No! I cannot! I demand you take me back to the house!"

So my reason returned. I had been mad for just an instant, in the company of madmen. Now I had prevailed, I thought.

Oh how I flattered myself!

Titus shook his head sadly.

The hulking servant drew a long knife out of his coat. My friend turned to me, and I think there was genuine regret in his voice and he spoke with terrifying calmness, like the little, shy Titus I had known when we were boys.

"I'm sorry Peter. You heard what she said. We have to kill you. Before she will come to us, we have to cut out the heart of my dearest friend. This ceremony, you must have noticed, has so far lacked any offering. I have to give up what is *most precious to me*. You cannot really say that you are surprised, can you?"

His voice broke. He sobbed like a terrified child.

But the servant stepped forward with the knife. Forthwith I drew a pistol and shot him through the brain.

Titus Cunningham stood as if transfixed. The look on his face was one of horror, as if all his hopes had been dashed in an instant. But then there was a hideous eagerness, a sense of relief, almost of joy, as if he saw *another way*.

What he did next sickened me. He took the knife and cut out the servant's heart. He held it in his bloody hands and placed it on the altar, before the jewelled skull of the French bishop.

"Please," he said, to the invisible air and to the wind and storm. "*Take this instead.*" And turning to me, he said, in a voice of utter exhaustion and resignation, "I am at the end of my resources. I don't know what will happen after this. Let us wait for the dawn, you and I, as we did so many times in the old days, and hope that all will be as it was before."

We sat on the floor, huddled together against the cold.

"As it was before," I repeated, but only to comfort him.

O precious illusion!

Ah Mephistopheles!

### 3

Enter, devils, with thunder and lightning –

There *was* thunder and lightning amid the snow-storm, a rare enough phenomenon of nature in any case. Now, I was sure, it signified the door to Hell swinging open, or even, horribly, something more.

We crouched on the floor. I held my friend in my arms. He whimpered, as if a child.

The slain servant's heart congealed on the altar.

"Peter, I am like Faustus on that last night. I want the clock to stop. I am on the very brink of damnation, and I am so much afraid. *Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven.*"

We waited. I could only sit and ponder: if my friend were mad, then his behaviour and desires might be the product of mental disease. What was my excuse?

An hour passed, or maybe three. The darkness did not abate.



"Peter, do you think I am evil?"

"No, I do not think you are evil at all. But you are wrong —"

"Wrong, how?"

"This is not the last night, but the first. All else has been prologue. The only question remaining is which one of us is Faustus."

"What?"

"Can't you see? She is here!"

"What?"

He broke away from me. He looked around frantically. It was clear that he saw nothing. When he had spoken to the air, before, that was mere delusion. Now, in the clarity of my own sanity, it was *I* who heard the soft footpads in the ruined chapel, heard them above the howling wind as if I had a special sense. It was *I* who beheld, first an outline in the darkness, then the full form of the thing that came, lion-bodied, winged, with the face of Countess Sophie-Marie Devereaux.

*I saw and Titus did not.*

That was the crowning jest, the final, cruel absurdity of it all, which I understood all in a flash.

Even as it was fated that I should be driven from the inn and thus arrive here this night, so it was also fated that the servant's heart should end up on the altar instead of mine.

She took no interest in such flummeries. She never had, except as they served her purpose.

I was very much afraid. I pushed my stupefied friend aside and said, "Spare him. Take me instead."

She said, "That was my intention all along."

The rest had been prologue.

*She came for me.*

She hooked a claw under my chin and led me into the darkness and the storm. I thought back to that conversation on the balcony of the chateau: What if immortal, amoral beings from the dark and haunted worlds of space toyed with mankind as a child toys with clay, creating fanciful shapes, crushing them at a whim, discarding stray bits?

Somewhere, behind the wind, Titus was screaming "It isn't fair!"

She held me in her terrible claws, and spread her wings, and leapt into the cold abyss, not into Hell or even toward Heaven, but beyond the sky, out, among the stars. There was a sickening plunge, a tremor like a thousand thunders. I closed my eyes for a time, and when I opened them, I beheld a million suns, like the froth of foam on a wave.

She spoke inside my mind in a soundless whisper all the while, and I then knew how irrelevant were Titus's conjurings and depravities, his childish clinging to ancient mythologies of God and Satan and such things as the shaped clay itself might imagine in the brief moment of its existence, but which can be of no interest to anyone else, surely, ever.

That was why the Sphinx had come for me instead.

That made the joke all the more sublime.

Yes, we walked upon the dark and haunted worlds, amid labyrinthine sepulchres filled with the bones of inhuman races. Here was infinity carved on the walls in a script no one would ever decipher, eternity stored away in vaulted libraries of books no one would ever open. We soared through an endless valley lined with

stone giants, beneath two pale blue suns, and stone heads ground slowly as we passed, regarding us. Whatever they knew, they did not utter.

In the atmosphere of a huge red star we beheld towering demons vaster than the Earth, who gazed down with eyes like dark moons, and spoke truly of things past and things passing and things to come, but in a language of roaring wind which would not resolve itself into words.

And I awoke, as if from one nightmare into a deeper one, in London, but not the city I had ever known; instead a vaster, darker place, filled with black smoke and thunders and armies of men marching off to battle behind armoured machines like great scarabae. I reigned like a king in this world. My factories belched out wealth and death. The scarabae were mine. The men I sent to their deaths were but instruments, as Titus had been but an instrument.

I saw in the dawn, many suns at once, all along the horizon, rising up like thrones of fire.

And my Sphinx beside me whispered, *You have done this thing, and it is neither good nor evil.*

I did not ask her to explain. I lacked the words to demand of her any riddle.

And darkness came over the Earth as the Sun itself died, and the last remnants of mankind retreated into black metal pyramids taller than the ancient, vanished mountains; and for a thousand thousand years these pyramids drifted across the dead sea bottoms on legs of flickering fire, while great monsters gazed upon them hungrily, with eyes like pock-marked moons. And the last human beings dwelt, not in serene philosophic calm, cataloguing the accumulated wisdom of history or preserving the last fragments of ancient beauty, but in bestial degradation, craving every pleasure, crazed with lust and pain and terror, mindlessly, like animals writhing in a pit, while Time, like jesting Pilate, seemed say, "Do you have what you want yet? Will you not rest?"

I dwelt there too, ageless and young once again, with Sophie-Marie Devereaux at my side. I could not even bring myself to ask her *why*, for in the ultimate catastrophe of reason, beyond the exhaustion of carnality, there could be no *why*. We were as ghosts, without sense, without feeling, without thought, mere fading echoes in the dark.

When the final life-current of the Earth was exhausted and the flickering fires went out, the pyramids settled into place, in the cold and silence, forever, like tombstones.

And we contemplated nothing at all but the black sky and the black, dead stars that filled it.

"That is the joke," she said. "It's not a riddle that you can answer."

"I don't think we're supposed to laugh at it," I replied.

## 4

*Et tu, Mephistopheles?*

We returned to the defiled chapel in the snowstorm.

The Sphinx released me from its claws. Sophie-Marie Devereaux stood beside me now, in human form, indeed, as my friend had described her, totally unchanged from the first time we had seen her.

"Was it all... just a vision?" I asked.

"When you pass through those years," she said, "you



will seem the visionary, because you will *know* what is to come. You have only to choose that it be so." She held out a chalice and bade me drink.

I gazed into her eyes, which were huge and terrible, like dark moons.

"What is it? The wine of immortality?"

"Or the excrement of time."

I drank.

I looked down at the floor, where Titus Cunningham lay huddled in his cloak, as if asleep or dead. And I thought, *The roles are reversed now. What is Faustus without his faithful servant Wagner?* What indeed, for Wagner is also damned, in a petty way. He hasn't sold his soul. He's just let his master borrow it.

"If you want," said the Sphinx, regarding him. (For she was transformed again). "Bring him along if it amuses you. Otherwise he will soon die, of cold or tertiary syphilis."

I pressed the cup to my friend's lips, weeping, because he was my friend and I had no other. Selfishly, I could not let him go.

When he awoke, his youth had returned. His face was soft and round, his eyes wide. He was the boy I had accompanied to Paris, so long before, now dwarfed in an old man's cloak. I think he was, again, innocent. I bore his guilt for him.

I explained that the Countess was not a demon at all, but more of a dog-trainer. It pleased her to make us

jump through hoops. This was another one.

He would follow me freely, and of his own will.

Out of friendship, I did not tell him all that was to come. That would have been too cruel.

I pause to write, in a century which is not my own, this account, which will be taken, I can mercifully hope, as a fiction, a wretched pretend-horror sufficient to titillate the masses.

It is the three of us, now, who go on through lives of indescribable strangeness, our infinitely varied pleasures tempered by the desperately held hope that somewhere, at the end, the flames await. Whether they are the flames of Gehenna, or of distant suns, or of my own making, I cannot say.

**Darrell Schweitzer's** last story here was the well-received "Refugees from an Imaginary Country" (issue 116). Also well-received was his last novel, *The Mask of the Sorcerer* (New English Library) – reviewed by Chris Gilmore in IZ 105.

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# "Did Alien Astronauts Make the Shroud of Turin?"

Gary Westfahl

Like most readers of *Interzone*, no doubt, I own many science-fiction novels that I've never read, but I try to catch up whenever I can. Recently, I finally read a 1983 paperback, *The Mansions of Space* by John Morressy, that I purchased long ago solely because the cover announced it was about the Shroud of Turin. And, while not exactly a religious person, I have long been fascinated with the Shroud because its existence proves one of two interesting things.

The first, obviously, is that a man who lived 2000 years ago miraculously returned from the dead, in the process emitting mysterious radiation that seared his image onto a burial shroud. Such physical evidence to support Christian doctrine would be astounding, and until 1988, one could cogently argue that the Shroud was authentic.

What happened then was that radioactive carbon-dating, meticulously executed by independent laboratories, showed that the Shroud was made only 700 years ago, about the time that it first surfaced in medieval Italy. For those who appreciate the science of carbon-dating, this conclusively demonstrated that the Shroud had been created at that time, not in ancient Palestine. (For those who do not appreciate the science, a review: on Earth, carbon overwhelmingly consists of stable carbon-12, atoms with 6 protons and 6 neutrons, though every trillionth atom or so is radioactive carbon-14, with 6 protons and 8 neutrons. When living organisms, mostly made of carbon, are alive, they constantly exude old carbon and absorb new carbon, so the ratio of carbon-14 to carbon-12 in their bodies remains  $1/10^{12}$ . When they die, the exchange process stops, and the radioactive carbon-14 atoms steadily decay, so the ratio of carbon-14 to carbon-12 gets smaller and smaller. Measure that ratio, and you roughly determine how old a piece of organic material is.)

Although believers in the Shroud devised various theories to account for the carbon dating – fire damage, unnoticed repairs to the cloth, even an extra dose of radioactivity from

Jesus's resurrected body – only one seemed logical: that undetected micro-organisms infesting the Shroud distorted the dating process. For if living material were mixed with 2000-year-old material, the result could be a date somewhere in between, say, 700 years ago. One can raise serious questions about the nature of these microorganisms, their ability to survive indefinitely without visible sustenance, and the remarkable coincidence that they attained by the 20th century the precise amount of growth needed to generate an incorrect date which coincided with the Shroud's first known appearance. Still, one cannot immediately say that the theory is impossible.

One can, though, quantitatively analyze the theory, and since I have long bedeviled my Precalculus students with carbon-dating word problems, I can walk you through the math.

If  $t$  is the number of years, the formula for carbon-dating from my *Precalculus* textbook is

$$\frac{\text{carbon-14}}{\text{carbon-12}} = \frac{1}{1,000,000,000,000} \times 2^{-t/5700}$$

If  $t$  equals 0 (the organism is alive), the ratio is simply one-trillionth, or  $1 \times 10^{-12}$ ; if  $t = 2000$ , the ratio is  $7.8411 \times 10^{-13}$ ; and if  $t = 700$ , the ratio is  $9.184 \times 10^{-13}$ . For any amount of Shroud material tested, let  $M$  equal the proportion of micro-organisms, so  $(1 - M)$  equals the proportion of genuine Shroud. We set up a mixture problem:  $M$  times the living ratio, plus  $(1 - M)$  times the 2000-year ratio, equals 1 times the 700-year ratio. Or,  $M \times (1 \times 10^{-12}) + (1 - M) \times (7.8411 \times 10^{-13}) = 9.184 \times 10^{-13}$ . And the answer is:  $M = 0.622$ .

In other words, for the theory to be correct, about 62% of the material believed to be the Shroud actually consists of micro-organisms. If this is true, one cannot say that the Shroud of Turin is infested with micro-organisms; the Shroud, basically, *is* micro-organisms. The Shroud of Turin is *alive* – and perhaps poised to crawl out of its case and smother the next scientist who questions its authenticity.

If, however, one accepts that the Shroud cannot possibly be authentic, its existence proves a second interesting thing: that about 700 years ago, there existed a really smart person who was capable of creating a convincing forgery using methods that modern researchers still do not understand and cannot duplicate.

Though the notion is apparently plausible, many who study the Shroud simply can't accept it. To suggest the impossibility of fraud, believers in the Shroud ask: how could someone in (presumably primitive) medieval Italy know enough to make a burial shroud similar to those actually used in the era of Jesus? How could this (presumably simple-minded) person invent a way to cover the Shroud with an image so persuasive that it looks better as a photographic negative? Even those who agree it's a forgery can't quite believe that someone living at the time could have pulled it off. Consider the absurd theory, now widely discussed, that Leonardo da Vinci made the Shroud of Turin, despite the inconvenient fact that the Shroud was already reported to exist about a century before he was born. Yet the reasoning underlying the idea is clear: since it is such a good forgery, a really smart person must have created the Shroud; the only really smart person in Italy around this time was Leonardo da Vinci; therefore, da Vinci must have created the Shroud.

However, we know that human anatomy and cranial capacity have not changed measurably throughout history. At any given time in the past, there must have existed a small percentage of highly intelligent people, even if we don't know their names. These people were certainly *ignorant* by modern standards, but they were not *stupid*. Today, smart people do remarkable things with plastics and microchips; centuries ago, smart people could do remarkable things with cloth and stone. A 14th-century Italian woman may well have been resourceful and intelligent enough to research ancient burial practices and devise an ingenious way to place a



convincing image of Jesus on a correctly-proportioned shroud.

Of course, a refusal to accept the intelligence of our ancestors is not limited to Shroud fanatics, as I was reminded one recent evening when I ended up watching a dull documentary about the Shroud of Turin – Ian Johnson, pontificating about his pet micro-organisms – primarily to avoid another documentary starring a man who I thought had been permanently laughed off the stage: Erich von Däniken.

In the early 1970s, like many people, I read von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* and was almost persuaded by its argument that alien astronauts had often contacted ancient civilizations. I started to become sceptical when, in his next book *Gods from Outer Space*, he preposterously asserted that the biblical story of the creation of Adam and Eve represented a garbled account of alien bioengineering. By the time he descended to obvious lies in *The Gold of the Gods*, describing personal visits to alleged hordes of secret alien treasures, I was no longer paying attention, and everyone else stopped paying attention as well.

But you can't keep a bad man down, I guess, because there he was, right before my disbelieving eyes, hosting a new documentary presenting the same old ideas.

There is no need to argue against the illogic and dubious evidence of the Von Däniken Hypothesis, since many others have done that work, but the key objection was well expressed by John Sladek in *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* (1979): "It is central to his thesis that all ancient peoples were moronic, unable to invent or imagine, capable only of copying what the spacemen showed them." Thus, every time a civilization accomplished something significant, like building pyramids or formulating an accurate calendar, it must be because aliens were helping them every step of the way.

In the new, improved, made-for-television version of the Von Däniken Hypothesis (which I witnessed only fleetingly, unable to watch for long), he claims that ancient people employed amazing alien machines, though they were too stupid to record, or pass on knowledge of, their existence in any way other than ambiguous artworks. To correct the historical record, Von Däniken constructs working devices resembling these artworks to "prove" that they really existed. He displayed an Egyptian wall-carving featuring something that, by desperate contortions of the imagination, looked like an elongated light bulb. Then he had an artisan construct an incandescent light bulb in exactly the same shape. He flipped the switch and, lo and

behold, the bulb lit up! Thus proving that aliens taught the Egyptians how to build light bulbs! Then, he built a larger model of a tiny trinket vaguely resembling an airplane, and discovered that it could fly! Thus proving that aliens taught the ancients how to build airplanes! Still, while von Däniken's archaeological acumen and reasoning ability have not improved with age, he is developing a definite flair for showmanship, so it is only appropriate that he now plans to build a German amusement park, a Von Dänikenland, devoted to his theories, which have value only as entertainment.

Of course, it remains possible that aliens once visited Earth, and several science-fiction works have explored the idea. Arthur C. Clarke intelligently speculated in *2001: A Space Odyssey* that aliens may have been responsible for humanity's ascent to intelligence; others, less intelligently, speculated that the gods of Greek mythology were really aliens (an idea that I first encountered in an old *Rip Hunter, Time Master* comic book, and later figured in a *Star Trek* episode); and *The X-Files* seems poised to argue that secret aliens have long been resident on Earth, pulling the strings of our civilization. The common theme is that our ancestors were manifestly too witless to develop tools or invent imaginative stories about gods or keep a society functioning without extraterrestrial assistance.

But my favorite story about archaic aliens, Poul Anderson's *The High Crusade*, offers an opposing viewpoint: here, medieval knights in shining armour quickly thwart an alien invasion, master their technology, and proceed to conquer the universe. An unlikely scenario? Probably. But if someone at that time was clever enough to outwit intelligent 20th-century people with a piece of cloth, others from that era may have been clever enough to outwit advanced aliens.

(Maybe, the logic of Von Däniken whispers, something like that *really happened*; maybe the Bayeux Tapestry, reputed to depict Halley's Comet, is actually a picture of a spaceship... However, while he has not entirely ignored phenomena like Stonehenge and French cave-drawings, the Swiss-born von Däniken generally declines to attribute the creations of early Europeans to altruistic aliens – presumably because only the non-white peoples of the world were entirely incapable of genuine achievement – which adds an unattractive tinge of racism to his already risible theory. It's a shame, though, since one could neatly account for the mysteries involving the Shroud of Turin by hypothesizing that it was crafted by aliens.)

And what about Morressy's *The Man-*

*sions of Space*, the novel that provoked these musings? Well, I can't say the book is an undiscovered masterpiece, but it's regrettable that this sort of novel is overlooked. It is unusually a kinder, gentler space opera, in which even the villains are nicer than the heroes of your average cyberpunk novel, and while never rising above competence in its execution, the novel ultimately earns your respect in a way that many flashier novels do not.

The story begins on Peter's Rock, a distant planet colonized by a remnant of the Catholic Church which left Earth carrying the Shroud of Turin, encased in a priceless reliquary, though it was later removed to parts unknown by a dissident sect. When they are visited by a free trader, the abbot does not care about finding the Shroud, but does want to spread his faith to other worlds; and the trader agrees to transport missionaries. Against all odds, they soon recruit many alien and human converts, including the once-sceptical trader himself.

While absolutely silent about the authenticity of the Shroud – which is never seen in the novel – and about the truth of Christianity itself, *The Mansions of Space* does argue that a belief-system perfected centuries ago by human beings may continue to be worthwhile in improving the lives of spacefaring humans, and even the lives of strange headless aliens. It is, like *The High Crusade*, one of the rare science-fiction novels about our descendants that acknowledges and venerates the intelligence of our ancestors.

The scarcity of such stories, while deplorable, should not be surprising. As individuals, we typically go through three stages in characterizing our parents: as children, we are awed by their abilities and deferential; as adolescents, we realize that our parents are really stupid and become rebellious; and in adulthood, as the saying goes, the older we get, the smarter our parents get. Civilizations undoubtedly experience a similar cycle: while older cultures rigidly adhere to tradition and worship their ancestors, our modern civilization, now in its giddy adolescence, happily ignores all the lessons of history as worthless irrelevancies and welcomes arguments that our ancestors were really congenital idiots secretly depending on divine or alien intervention to accomplish anything. Like the famous tantrum at the end of Robert A. Heinlein's *Have Space Suit-Will Travel*, it is an attitude both embarrassing and endearing.

So, instead of condemning our current disrespect for ancient peoples, perhaps we should cherish it while it lasts; for when our ancestors start getting smarter, it will mean that we as a species are getting older.

Gary Westfahl



Once again, the Hugos... Novel: Joe Haldeman, *Forever Peace*. Novella: Allen Steele, "...Where Angels Fear to Tread." Novelette: Bill Johnson, "We Will Drink a Fish Together..." Short: Mike Resnick, "The 43 Antarean Dynasties." Best Related Book: *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* ed. John Clute & John Grant. Dramatic: *Contact*. Editor: Gardner Dozois (*Asimov's*). Artist: Bob Eggleton. Semiprozine: *Locus*. Fanzine: *Mimosa*. Fan Writer: David Langford. Fan Artist: Joe Mayhew. John W. Campbell Award: Mary Doria Russell.

## THE XOCHITL SODALITY

**James Baen** will accept any reasonable offer for the 100,000 copies of Newt Gingrich's skiffy epic *1945* still cluttering the Baen Books warehouse. He's now come clean about the famous "pouting sex kitten... sitting athwart his chest" sentences which let Gingrich in for so much teasing: "Basically, I wrote them to spice the book up." Baen feels a modest pride in having restored popularity to the moribund terms "sex kitten" and, of course, "athwart."

**David Brin** stars in a no-longer-new story still going the rounds this summer. Emerging from a Los Angeles sf party, he found his car had been broken into and declared the outrage to be almost certainly the work of the Swiss. This nation, he explained, was out to get him after dark revelations in his nonfiction writing. Bystanders thought he was joking, until the police arrived and he repeated the same accusation to them... Fellow-pros at the US Westerncon planned heart-warming acts of support, such as sending Mr Brin parcels of Swiss cheese and chocolate (Gardner Dozois's suggestion), or phoning him at odd hours to play recordings of cuckoo clocks. Tut, tut.

**Harlan Ellison** made a surprise appearance at the US Readercon, loudly announcing in the lobby that he had come to "punch out" critic Gregory Feeley. An interested crowd gathered, but it was felt that the absence of Feeley himself - who had unknowingly taken his children home to bed - caused this mighty clash of Author vs Critic to lack a certain something.

**Paul Lehr** (1930-1998), legendary sf artist since 1958, died of pancreatic cancer on 27 July. As the end approached with dismay speed, Bob Eggleton wrote: "He is a major star in the SF art universe: most recently, and thankfully given what's happening, his work was showcased in Vin DiFate's *Infinite Visions* book - and on the cover."

**Robert A. W. Lowndes** (1916-1998) died on 14 July aged 81. A member of the famous 1930s-40s Futurians group, he edited many genre magazines 1941-1970; as a writer, he published both solo and in collaboration

## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

with Futurians, including Donald Wollheim and James Blish.

**Terry Pratchett** collectors are doubtless fighting over copies of the *Legends* (ed. Robert Silverberg) anthology sampler issued by HarperCollins: two complete stories bound back-to-back, being a new Discworld tale and something by a chap called Feist. (*Who he? - Ed.*)

**Alison Spedding**, reports her editor Jane Johnson, is most depressed in that Bolivian prison and welcomes letters sent c/o Debbie Aliaga, British Embassy, Avenida Arc 2732, PO Box 694, La Paz, Bolivia. Pleas for leniency can be directed to the Bolivian Embassy, 106 Eaton Square, London, SW1W 9AD. Alas, however unfairly accused of drug-dealing and singled out for search, the hapless Spedding does indeed acknowledge having 2kg of marijuana in her flat. Reportedly her lawyer's best hope is a 4-5 year sentence which might be halved by parole.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Pseudonym Mysteries.** The Sci-Fi Channel spinoff novel *The Guardians: The Krilov Continuum* (Millennium) is by "J. M. H. Lovegrove," identified as "the pseudonym of an Arthur C. Clarke Award short-listed author." Intense study of the 1998 Clarke shortlist suggests that the man behind this cryptic nom-de-plume might just be... James Lovegrove. Meanwhile, though a mild stir resulted from the outing of "David Farland" as Dave Wolverton, Farland's novel appears on the Other Books By page of *The Lord of the Seventh Swarm* by, er, Dave Wolverton.

**More Awards.** The John W. Campbell Memorial Award went to Joe Haldeman's *Forever Peace*, the Prometheus (libertarian sf) Award to Ken MacLeod's *The Star Fraction*, and the Sturgeon Memorial Award to Michael F. Flynn's "House of Dreams" (*Asimov's* Oct/Nov 1997).

**Small Press.** *Noesis* is a new quarterly sf magazine: 61 Pengarth Rise, Falmouth, Cornwall, TR11 2RR... *The Tall Adventurer* is a detailed E. C. Tubb bibliography, covering all known printings, translations, etc. 200pp; £12/\$20 from Becon Publications, 75 Rosslyn Ave, Harold Wood, Essex, RM3 0RG.

**Barney the Dinosaur** rarely features here, but let's make an exception for Lyrick's *Barney Sing A-Long Songs* audiocassette—whose press release may have been drafted by someone under notice: "...they're perfect for short or long car trips anywhere! Instead of having those little shits clamoring to stop at the next McDonalds, or those interminable whines of 'When we gonna get there' or 'I really gotta go, Mommy,' plug their little ears with these latest banalities from Lyrick and you're guaranteed to arrive free of stress."

**Mythopoeic Award** winners: *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* ed. John Clute & John Grant (Scholarship, General), *A Question of Time: J. R. R. Tolkien's Road to Faerie* by Verlyn Flieger (Scholarship, Inklings Studies), *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* by A. S. Byatt (Adult Fiction) and Jane Yolen's *Young Merlin* trilogy (Children's Fiction).

**Thog's Masterclass.** *True Romance Dept Returns*: "He impaled her and their two bodies melted together, limbs fusing, faces haloed by radiant neural coronae that conjoined their brains. Their minds sang together in a duet of mental intercourse more ecstatic than that of the body. He opened his uttermost depths to her. She did not hesitate to reciprocate and in the aftermath of the ringing consummation they caught a brief glimpse of what they had been searching for." (Julian May, *Magnificat*, 1996)... "I don't think liquidizing a frog in a blender can be considered serious scientific research, Swire." (Peter James, *Twilight*, 1991)... "Neither was the fact that they smelled bad enough to gag a skunk. That would have to wait." Our researcher John M. Ford deplors the omission of the promised skunk-gagging scene. (Tom Clancy, *Rainbow Six*, 1998)... "Terry threw herself into the job like an impatient suicide off a low bridge." "Franco arrived home that evening with the haunted stare of a destitute diabetic in a strange city at night." "She succumbed to the rutting stamina unleashed by the notion that they were indifferent strangers chosen for selfish, carnal, anonymous pleasures." (all Rock "Son of Yul" Brynner, *The Doomsday Report*, 1998)... *Dept of Mendelian Insight*: "I wonder, John," said Piers to Rattray, "is this ability to engineer an antigravity drive a hereditary thing...?" (J. M. H. Lovegrove, *The Krilov Continuum*, 1998)



Space opera occupies a central place in sf's canon. It can be embarrassing and gaudy, naive and lushly romantic, yet at its best it is thrilling and vital, full of grand gestures and wonders, and capable of providing a stage on which all of sf's devices can be fully deployed. From the early raw stuff of E. E. "Doc" Smith, in which good old American boys rode out on rocket ships to tame a contrary galaxy, in the more self-conscious period after sf's golden age it has evolved (with the exception of certain obvious living fossils like *Star Trek*) into two separate streams: the "low" or mercantile/military, in which good old Terran boys buy and sell the galaxy in the name of capitalism and often incidentally save the human race (a prime example is Poul Anderson's "Technic History" series); and the "high" or transcendental, whose grand-daddy is Frank Herbert's *Dune*, which uncovers, often through religious metaphor, a manifest destiny enabling us to rise above our own selves and master the secrets of the universe. (At the head of this divergence is James Blish's *Cities in Flight* tetralogy, which begins with New York going cap-in-hand among the stars looking for lawns to be mowed, and ends with its mayor literally creating a new universe.)

Both types share common tropes: vast sweeps of space and implied history; gorgeously alien worlds and strange societies knit together by commerce or religion; larger-than-life heroes involved in epic deeds. Most of all, they tell big stories: Peter Hamilton's mercantile/military "Night's Dawn" trilogy will need a million words to tell its tall tale; Dan Simmons's transcendental "Hyperion Cantos" is not much shorter. Like the spate of Tolkien-inspired fantasies, space operas are epics, but while it is easy to point out similarities (wizards/scientists, horses/spaceships, kingdoms/planets, orcs/aliens, elves/wise elder races), the stories of epic fantasy are of restitution, while those of space opera are of expansion and unlimited ascension.

David Zindell's trilogy (although strictly speaking his first novel, *Neverness*, is a prequel), "A Requiem for Homo Sapiens," is one of the most ambitious space operas yet, and has been long in the telling. But with the publication of the final volume, *War in Heaven* (Bantam, \$5.99; Voyager, £11.99), it is possible to judge whether Zindell's grasp has matched that ambition.

We begin at the beginning. The hero of the trilogy is Danlo the Wild, son of Mallory Ringess, who, as told in *Neverness* (published in 1988), became the finest of the pilots of the Order of Mystic Mathematicians and Other Seekers of the Ineffable Flame, and then vanished, becoming according to rumour a god. Young Danlo is

brought up amongst a tribe of Alaloi, a Neanderthal-like race living wild in the icefields beyond the city of Neverness. When his tribe is killed by a plague, Danlo sets out for Neverness in search of a cure and discovers that it was created by the Architects of the Universal Cybernetic Church, which may possess a cure but which has migrated to a part of the Galaxy known as the Vild, where it is destroying stars. Danlo follows his father's tradition and becomes a pilot (and also becomes involved in the creation of a new religion, the Way of Ringess, whose god is his father and whose creed is the secret history written in human genes by ancient

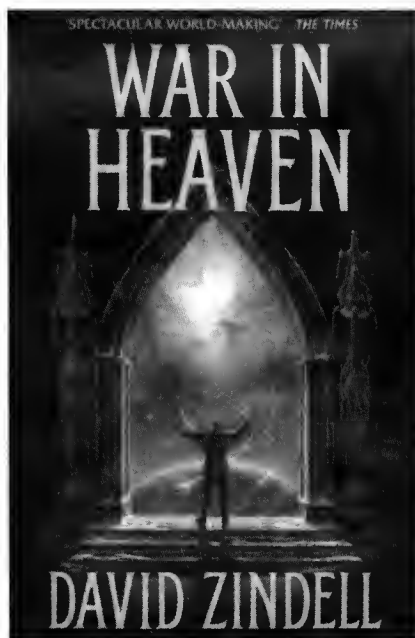
wise aliens) and sets out to search for the Architects and their cure. But although he finds the Architects and brings an end to a chain reaction of supernovas that threatens the Galaxy, he fails to find the cure, and instead discovers the remains of Ede, the god who founded the Cybernetic Church, and becomes involved with a war amongst human beings vastened into gods which will determine the future of humanity.

And now Danlo is instrumental in gathering together forces opposing the Way of Ringess, led by his erstwhile friend Hanuman, who in a fit of jealousy destroyed the memory of Danlo's lover, and who is now intent on constructing a Universal Computer into which he might escape into the perfection of infinite virtual reality. And so at last the story returns to Neverness, and it is a welcome return, for it is here, with a contraction in scale and foregrounding of Danlo's human struggle to save his reformed lover and their child against the epic struggle between vast fleets of starships, that Zindell's writing becomes fully alive. Neverness is his great creation, and his evocations of that city, with its swarming icy streets, strange customs and ancient history, are vivid and fresh (although his prose is still at times infected with a swooning richness that threatens to drown the reader in incidental detail).

In describing the deeds of men and men-become-gods, Zindell, especially in the second volume of his trilogy, too often fell into use of an artificially heightened and archaic language, echoing the biblical cadences of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, to inflate the importance of feats of heroism (with Danlo as the hidden king, the cure for the plague as the

## Think Big

Paul J. McAuley







grail, an old alien as Merlin, Hanuman as Morgan Le Fey, ruling over a virtual-reality fairyland, and the many heroic pilots as knights, there are enough explicit parallels between Zindell's trilogy and the myth of Arthur to feed a meaty thesis). But now, in *Neverness*, in the last volume of the trilogy, the narrative is fully focused upon Danlo, one of the most complex and fully realized (albeit hesitant and inward-looking) heroes in science fiction, and his conflict with Hanuman.

Danlo, struggling with his vow never to harm any living thing, arrives as an ambassador, attempting to prevent a war which echoes that between the gods. But Hanuman imprisons and tortures Danlo, who through torture achieves a strengthened inner vision; as battles between vast fleets of starships commence, Danlo is rescued by a dissident group and hides out in *Neverness*, whose population is starving because the food factories have been destroyed. Danlo finds his lost love and a son, and through tragedy forges a new determination to confront Hanuman, this time by altering himself to look like his father (or rather, like the Alaloi his father had himself changed into), and by deploying the wisdom he gained on his long adventures. Ultimately, it is nothing less than a defence of the *thingness* of the universe Zindell so lovingly and lushly describes against the contrived artful irreality of computer-generated worlds.

Like the space operas of old, Zindell's trilogy is romantic, epic and compelling; in its telling, with its attention to detail and characterization, its epic set-pieces and plethora of richly invented worlds, and its dramatization of complex philosophical dialectics and fusion of Christian and Taoist symbolism, he has proven himself to be one of the most skilled writers we have. His trilogy is in the end no requiem but a celebration, an anthem. It is hugely ambitious, and hugely successful in fulfilling the promise of that ambition. It contains worlds and worlds. It is wise. It is good.

Although Nancy Kress's first three novels were fantasies, her later novels are establishing her as one of sf's most perceptive and agile writers, concerned with the ways in which science affects the grain of the lives of ordinary people who inhabit the futures it creates. Her new novel, *Maximum Light* (Tor, \$22.95), showcases her ability to create acutely observed characters, and it is through their perspectives that she explores a plethora of religious, scientific and personal dilemmas raised by biotechnology.

It is the middle of the next century, and human fertility has been reduced by 80%. Shana Walders, 19, is coming to the end of her National Service duty when she volunteers to help people retrieve their pets from a residential area cordoned off because of a chemical-cargo train wreck. But the man she has been assigned to escort escapes from her, and she sees him run off with a cage of monkeys with human faces. Her subsequent report draws the attention of a Congressional Committee, but although she is humiliated when she is questioned, she is believed by Nick Clementi, a 75-year-old medical advisor to the government, who thinks that the monkeys may be the result of a vivifaction process (by which tissues may be grown and fused without genetic manipulation) rather than of banned genetic engineering. Meanwhile, Shana, released from National Service after being refused transfer to the regular army, falls in with a gang of old friends who go out gay-bashing; she encounters and saves Cameron Atuli, a principal dancer with the National Ballet who has voluntarily had part of his memory removed and whose face is that Shana saw on the monkeys. The story is told in alternate chapters by the three main characters, who must surmount their faults – Shana's selfishness, Cameron's arrogance, Nick's despair – so that they can act together and solve the mystery, which involves discovery of just what Cameron was so desperate to forget and leads to a conspiracy at the heart of the government.

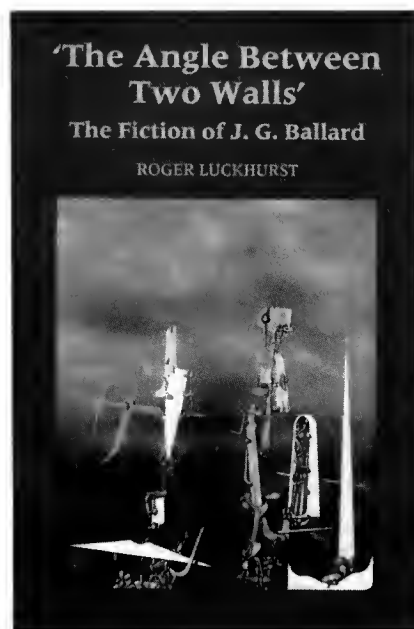
The effects of the fertility crisis are cleverly revealed through the sensibilities of those inhabiting it rather than direct exposition. The young are

spoilt by all around them, but contemptuous of the mouldy oldies who patronize and protect them; motherhood is encouraged but single mothers have to struggle with bad jobs and *ad hoc* childcare, and the fear that their children will be taken from them by welfare and farmed out to rich childless couples; stringent government measures have stripped away many civil rights. All this makes for a depiction of a richly detailed and believable future, although Kress's concentration on the interaction of her characters rather than the mystery itself means that the plot must be wound up through a series of convenient revelations. And despite some hand-waving by Kress, it's hard to believe that something as global and fundamental as the fertility crisis would not stimulate a world-wide programme of research; instead, nothing is done until someone from the US finally coordinates an international team, much as Errol Flynn won the Second World War in the Hollywood version of history.

Nevertheless, this is finely written and lucid novel which has something significant to say about the goodness that resides in the least likely of us, and the power of that goodness to make the world a better place. It speaks as much from the heart as from the head.

Charles Sheffield's *Aftermath* (Bantam, \$13.95) is a disaster novel built around a more conventional sf template, in which the wrecking of the world is a chance to build it anew. Throw anything at us humans, its aggressively optimistic tone implies, and we'll just pick ourselves up and build an even better civilization on the ruins of the old.

In the 2020s, Alpha Centauri goes supernova, irradiates the southern hemisphere, wrecks the world's weather, and destroys all microchips with a flash of gamma rays. After several brief cinematic clips showing the disaster from the viewpoints of various disposable characters (Sheffield adheres to the convention that disasters must be described by their human victims, leading to a laborious sequence of false starts as characters are thrown away as soon as their detailed backgrounds have been established), we settle on the stories of three groups of survivors. The President of the US must cope with national disaster, political intrigue and a crisis in his love-life as a rapacious old flame plots to seduce him; a group of cancer patients must revive from the deep coma of judicial sleep a monstrous child murderer but brilliant research scientist with more than a hint of Hannibal Lecter about him, for only he can continue the radical treatment which keeps them alive; and





members of the returning Mars expedition find a way down from orbit but fall into the hands of a militant cult, the Eye of God, whose leader claims to have predicted the disaster.

Sheffield sets out, with the admirable clarity we expect from this fine writer of hard sf, the complex effects of the global disaster and its inevitable lessons in *hubris* and dependence on frail technologies, and he draws the three strands of the plot together convincingly. But only that involving the cancer victims is wholly plausible, and only they are shown to deal with the consequences of the disaster directly; the President's part of the tale is overladen with so many soap-opera-style romantic clichés that one expects Henry Kissinger to make a walk-on appearance; and while the astronauts' struggle in space is gripping, the cult which imprisons them when they return to Earth is thinly drawn and disposed of in a perfunctory shoot-out that mostly occurs off-stage. More problematically, the ending is clearly the slingshot for a sequel: the child-killer escapes; the cult leader vows to return; scientists discover that in 50 years time a worse effect of the supernova will strike; and there's a hint that the supernova may have been artificially caused. In the end, the disaster is not as comprehensive as first claimed.

R. Garcia Y Robertson's *The Moon Maid and Other Fantastic Adventures* (Golden Gryphon, \$22.95) is the second single-author collection published by Jim Turner's new small-press venture and collects eight stories previously published in *Asimov's SF* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Whether set in a gritty space-opera future, Dark Age Scandinavia or an ancient Greece where mythic heroes roam, they are as robustly romantic as the cover painting of a richly garbed Amazon and her lions implies.

In the tradition of the American Tall Tale, all feature trickster figures, able by low cunning to dupe their wealthier and more powerful social superiors. While harking back to the swashbuckling sagas of the genre's innocence, they are (apart from occasionally formulaic characterization) written with verve and flair, and their settings are packed with incidental and authentic detail (Robertson is a historian). The best-known story here is probably "Gypsy Trade," in which time-travelling gypsies turn a profit and bring villains to justice, but an equally fine showcase for Robertson's strengths is "The Other Magpie," which tells how a young woman of the Crow tribe of Native Americans searches for revenge against the Sioux who killed her brother, and becomes involved with General Custer and the Battle of the

Little Big Horn. It is both a fast-moving and believable adventure and a complex and compelling evocation of an alien culture from whose viewpoint well-worn historical clichés are seen afresh. Recommended.

#### Also noted:

Roger Luckhurst's "*The Angle Between Two Walls*": *The Fiction of J.G. Ballard* (St Martin's Press, \$39.95; a preview article was published in *Interzone* 106) is a slim academic tome which, despite the sometimes ponderous puns and inviolated jargon of post-modernist theory, delivers a penetrating analysis of Ballard's fiction and its place at the hinge between "literature" and "science fiction." Luckhurst's examination of the neuroses, peculiarities and resentments of the sf community gives a useful perspective on the way in which aggressive self-definition of a genre is ultimately limiting and futile, and his dissection of how Ballard's work haunts a unique interzone is (provided you can hack your

way through the thickets of Theory) absorbing.

#### Exorcisms and Ecstasies

(Fedogan & Bremer, \$32) is a posthumous collection, edited by Stephen Jones, of Karl Edward Wagner's last short stories and unpublished fragments. Wagner, perhaps best known for his series of stories and novels about Kane, the Mystic Swordsman, and his long stint as editor of *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, was a larger-than-life character who took the legend of the self-destructive writer perhaps a little too literally. The stories, often set in London, the city he liked best, are full of the vigour, sometimes crude, always powerful, of the pulps he loved, leavened with acute psychological insights (he trained as a clinical psychologist). They are interleaved with fulsome but sorrowful recollections by Ramsey Campbell, Peter Straub and others that show how much he is missed and mourned: this is his *memento mori*.

Paul J. McAuley

## Inner Volumes

Chris Gilmore

Someone, somewhere, has probably written a treatise on how best to review the inner volumes of multi-volume novels. If any reader knows of it, perhaps he'll get in touch. Meanwhile... My review of Kate Elliott's *King's Dragon*, which is Volume 1 of *Crown of Stars*, appeared in *Interzone* 127 and gives, I hope, an idea of the milieu and the book's virtues. These include some attractive young leading characters; a complex and vivid background; wicked, manipulative priests; and an entertaining theology with many parallels to that of medieval Christianity. Its major vice is that Elliott's society is alleged to be matriarchal, but is entirely too similar to the uncompromisingly patriarchal society of medieval Christendom for the many powerful female characters to be convincing in their roles – it's simply not enough to change the signs.

This second volume, *Prince of Dogs* (Orbit, £16.99 & £10.99), continues in much the same style, and there's no point in buying it unless you've already enjoyed the first – Elliott is rightly sparing with datadumps. As is common with big fantasy

novels, the action spreads out: Liath, separated from Wolfhere but still a King's Eagle, is once again threatened by the loathsome but handsome Hugh – how can she break permanently free? Alain, who is finding the values and affections he acquired with his foster-parents difficult to square with those imposed by his natural father, is falling into ever deeper communion with the unnamed Eika prince, who is on a mission to subjugate and unify the tribes – what will befall this unlikely David and Jonathan? Prince Sanglant has not died gloriously in battle as is widely believed, but is being kept under sanity-eroding conditions among Bloodheart's hideous hellhounds – will he escape whole (or at least reparable) in mind? Ivar remains imprisoned in the monastery to which he has been consigned – will he escape, and at what cost? Two new youthful protagonists, Anna and Matthias, have survived the sack of Gent and its investiture by the Eika – how will they interact with the other juveniles?

On the basis of what I've seen, I'm prepared to predict a heavy thinning-





out of major characters, especially from the older generation, in the next volume (or two), with a permanent peace established between Human and Eika plus various young loves being consummated (off-stage, for the most part). Fantasies of this type are heavily into regeneration and redemption, and this is a very conventional book – which is not to condemn it, but its virtues reside in the execution, not the concept. The writing is workmanlike, with few bad habits, though Elliott has the curious tic of adding an apostrophe at the beginning of round, as if it were short for around. Perhaps she's trying to develop a trademark; if so she should try something more worthy of her talents. Characterization and visualization are both above average, which is why the reader will want answers to all the questions in the preceding paragraph – assuming the reader likes this sort of thing, this is how it should be done.

Every writer builds his own world, which he invites the reader to share; Elliott's achievement lies in the evident care and zest with which she has built up her milieu, and that's what sets her world, and her book, above the ruck. She has created something she believes is worth sharing, and is able to communicate that belief, but it's a long road ahead; when (in the third week of July) I visited the Orbit website, it hadn't heard of her. The art is long.

Jack Vance has been building up a uniquely engaging milieu since before Elliott was born, and his *Ports of Call* (Tor, \$25.95) consists literally of a short tour of some backwaters of the Gaean Reach, the story being picaresque to the point of evanescence. The rich but nutty Hester Lajoie, having unexpectedly acquired a space-yacht, allows Myron Tany, her young nephew, to accompany her on her quest for the Fountain of Youth, nominally as captain but actually as unpaid companion; they quarrel, and she maroons him on a civilized but inhospitable planet (the worlds of the Reach are all great places to visit but —). There he obtains a post as supercargo on a tramp freighter with some low-class passenger accommodation; he and the amiable misfits who constitute its crew visit more worlds, collecting and delivering cargo, interacting with people they meet and taking on some passengers en route. End.

Oops?! Where's the development of character and plot, the dovetailing of apparently unrelated strands, the *denouement*, the catharsis the *shape*, even? Nowhere. This book exists entirely as a vehicle for its own ornamentation, which is exactly the sort of ornamentation which Vance has been providing this last half century. He does it as brilliantly as ever, with

his customary (and total) disregard for all the rules which lesser writers flout at their peril.

Myron is a variation on the usual Vance young man: easy-going, brave and highly sexed, but essentially phlegmatic and reactive. The worlds are the usual Vance worlds: somewhat run-down, with much wildness and no great cities, steeped in gruesome history, productive of artefacts (some exquisite, some grotesque, some both), supporting populations whose superficial affability masks most inadequately the hypertrophied greed, venality and callousness which they share with the native fauna (which also partake of their general folly but not their specific vanity). The minor characters are the usual Vance bit-players: mildly obsessive, blithely aware of their own waywardness (though absolutely determined not to moderate it), boundlessly willing to engage in banter, but always in a single voice – the voice best tuned to veil baleful hostility behind the translucent tropes of moral relativism. One suspects them of practising their *bons mots* before the shaving mirror, but why not, if the *mots* emerge sufficiently *bons*?

It seems impossible that anyone could work such a narrow seam for so long without repeating himself, but many of Vance's impeccably presented jokes are actually new. Aunt Hester will be a half-familiar figure to those who know the comic aunts of the 20s and 30s, but here is a surly waiter like no other:

Myron turned to the glowering waiter. "Bring me two flasks of the seventeen-dinket ale."

"And what to eat?"

The off-worlder again offered advice. "Take imported biscuits and cheese, on clean plates."

Myron told the waiter: "We will try an order of biscuits and cheese, at the menu price, on clean plates, if you please."

"You must pay a premium for clean plates. It is how we amortise the expense of dishwashing."

Eat your heart out, anyone who has ever been employed in customer service – especially in a Total Quality environment.

At the other end of his emotional range, Vance dashes off a scene of intense eroticism combined with equally acute suspense which must recall in heightened form every man's recollection of a sexual encounter with a woman he surely desired, wished to love but couldn't quite bring himself to trust. It's presented, as usual, without moralistic comment on the part of the author, and bites the deeper therefor.

I have but a single complaint against this book – at a scant 300 pages there is nothing like enough of

it. Indeed, the tour ends most abruptly, with many loose ends unaccounted for – is there perhaps a sequel in preparation? Can there be, please? PLEASE!

And after two such pure forms, here comes a thoroughgoing hybrid – half scenario for a disaster movie, half sociological treatise on the ultimate in crisis management. Steve Baxter's *Moonseed* (Voyager, £16.99) is based on a dubious extension of superstring theory – that should circumstances allow an uncoiling of the suppressed dimensions at any point, that uncoiling would begin to propagate throughout all adjacent matter. I can see no obvious reason why this should happen, and still less why a sub-quark effect should, as Baxter postulates, discriminate among such molecular manifestations as crystalline lattice-structures. Baxter gets round this by invoking the manipulations of nano-machinery, which may be an evolved, inorganic life-form or the mutated posterity of an alien space-probe. Either way, they seem to be trying to build something, using the Earth as feedstock. For the sake of the story, OK.

It's fairly early in the next century, and someone sets things off by dropping some moon dust on Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh. It starts liquefying the old lava flows, bringing on earthquakes, vulcanism, and general disruption. The result is essentially an old-fashioned disaster novel but unlike the majority, where the disaster is swift, if not entirely unexpected: the two great power-blocs loose off their entire arsenals in less than a day; the Night of the Green Flashes is followed by the Day of the Triffids; Isherwood Williams gets over his snakebite to find the human race 99.99% dead; Russell Gary sleeps off his binge to find the eastern seaboard is a plague zone and the western doesn't want to know the survivors; Lucifer's Hammer hits.

*Moonseed* is closer in structure to Ward Moore's *Greener Than You Think*, in that the disaster proceeds at a steady acceleration and we get to see it all. It therefore has to stand or fall by the human and scientific interest it's able to arouse, and its inherent credibility. Its score is patchy in all areas. Baxter is good at vignettes, but his principals tend to lack charm. Geologist Henry Meacher, the Man who Really Understands what's Going On, is a cliché American in Britain, doing constant double-takes over the way we drive on the left and have working buildings older than the USA, jokes that were old before I was born. Meanwhile Geena, his estranged wife, also realizes that the Earth is doomed and (laudably enough) sets about attempting to revitalize the space programme so as to found a self-sustaining colony on



the Moon before it's too late. To this end the two of them wind up in a very cramped capsule, with Henry forced to play gooseberry between Geena and her gung-ho Russian lover.

I've no quarrel with the dynamics, and Baxter handles his data-dumps credibly, though there are rather a lot of them. If someone gets lectured about seismology or geology for the edification of the reader, it's because the person talking knows these subjects, and the one receiving the data needs to know. Baxter has obviously researched both, and the history, traditions and present sorry state of the Russian and American space programmes, to formidable depth, and his descriptions have the inherent interest of the authentic. Likewise, when old NASA hands bitch about withdrawal of funding, they're the sort who would bitch in that way, in those circumstances. All this makes for high-quality process-writing, but inherent credibility doesn't bestow human interest; far too many of his people are *dull*, and the least dull are the ones he kills off before we really get to know them.

Worse is the sloppiness of some of Baxter's science. He says at one point that a supernova at 100 lightyears would be sufficient to inflict near-lethal doses of radiation on the Earth. That struck me as unlikely, as a 100-lightyear radius will enclose quite a large number of massive stars even now – far more in the early phases of the galaxy. By now we should be crisped many times over. However, a rough back-of-a-spreadsheet calculation reveals that for a few weeks we might receive from a supernova some *five* lightyears away about as much light and heat as we get daily from the sun. The light and heat would cause many species die-offs, especially if the event took place in the sun's sector of the sky. As for the gamma, Earth's thick, heavy atmosphere would degrade almost all of it; against such a background, a doubling or tripling of the background count would be the least of anyone's worries. Perhaps Baxter has confused a supernova with a quasar. [*We think it unlikely Steve Baxter would make such a confusion; see also the review by Paul McAuley in this issue of Charles Sheffield's latest novel, which uses a similar idea – Editors.*]

Baxter describes gun-metal, the form of bronze from which the Victoria Cross is made, as grey. (That solecism is so widespread that the *OED* sanctions it, which is no excuse.) Worst of all, he blandly informs us that within a single generation random mutations could give rise to a new, self-fertile species of mankind infertile with the current model. I was prepared to stomach the opening McGuffin, but that sort of avoidable howler undermines the book's credibility; Baxter's in-depth research is

admirable, but he or his publisher should have hired a technical editor to check this far simpler stuff.

So does the Earth succumb to necrosis? Does the human race die ignominiously? I'm not telling – it would be unfair to the author. But personally, I'm far more concerned over whether Myron Tany gets laid (and/or finds true love at last). Someone has to watch over the things that really matter.

And after the hybrid, back to the reassuringly familiar. Jane Routley's *Fire Angels* (Avon, \$13, B-format) is set in a stock sword-and-sorcery world where, as is often the case, the action is confined to a peninsula which looks as if it ought to be about the size of Spain (there's no scale, so one can't be sure), though of less regular shape.

The story is equally conventional: in the land of Moria mages are persecuted, mainly by those mages who have thrown in their lot with the puritanical Church of the Burning Light. Moreover, to the east of Moria lies the Great Waste, where something supernatural and nasty enough to menace the entire peninsula is brewing, the outward sign being incursions of Fire Angels. These are not at all angelic, but moronic fire-elementals of great destructive capacity, and (of course) they are deployed by corrupt necromancers who have perverted the Burning Light.

As usual, the principal gets sucked in, very unwillingly, when duty calls; but Dion's an unusually attractive principal, being not only a natural

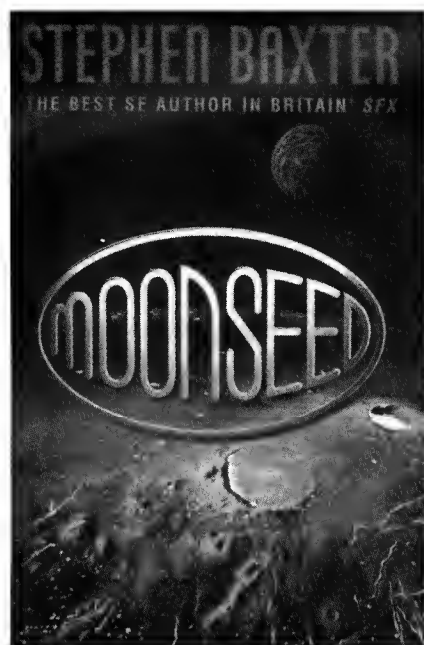
mage of great power but a highly sexed, level-headed good-time girl, far from averse to a roll in the hay with any nice-looking man who's prepared to treat her kindly – as was her mother, whose seven children had quite a variety of fathers. Aho! Why did I meet so few like that when I was younger and prettier than I have since become? (Don't nobody bother answering that!) So the usual plot dynamics are spiced with the question, will Dion find true love at last, and if so with whom?

Routley writes convincingly about the realities of hiding out in hostile territory, and the political compromises which arise when far too many people allegedly on the same side have far too much to lose to each other. She also has a good extended passage set in Hell on Earth. On the minus side, she is simply not a very good writer. She is not atrociously bad either, but to say that is to damn with the faintest praise imaginable. Her prose is full of the banal errors which afflict those who have not been well taught, and who lack the instinct for the language which might offset that deficiency. She is uncertain about her genitives: Tomas' (wrong) appears about as often as Tomas's (right). In one paragraph of 12 lines the word "women" appears six times, and not through any use or misuse of rhetoric, but through incompetence. She uses I for me, us for we, who for whom in the narrative as well as the dialogue, and "caring" as an adjective of general benevolence. Rule for novice writers: the verb to care takes the dative, usually introduced by either "for" or "about." If you have used any part of that verb in a way which does not specify, implicitly or explicitly, for what or for whom the subject cares, you have used it wrongly.

I'm generally quite laid back about disliking books, but because I liked her heroine and her view of the political process, I really wanted to like *Fire Angels* far better than, in the end, I could. Others may succeed where I failed, but if she's to achieve any distinction in this field, Routley needs to learn the language or acquire a competent editor. If she finds the first impossible and the second prohibitively expensive, that's her misfortune, not the reader's – have I not just reviewed Kate Elliott? No one needs two such books in the same month, and next month there'll be plenty more for myself and others to review, and you to read – or not.

Finally, I should mention that though this book follows on from one called *Mage Heart*, which I haven't seen, it's a genuine sequel, telling a different story and involving many new characters. It stands alone well enough, though the enthusiast will want to read the earlier book first.

Chris Gilmore







And both Neils are relieved too. After years of having to give somewhat less than rave reviews to a string of Dozois doorstep best-of anthologies (something we trust you'll believe we really don't enjoy), not to mention slogging through them, hoping to rediscover the same prose gold of the now dim-and-distant, yet fondly-remembered, *Eighth Collection*, we've finally found a Dozois we can be reasonably upbeat about.

Mind you, it's not that *The Year's Best Science Fiction, Fifteenth Annual Collection*, edited by Gardner Dozois (St Martin's Griffin, \$17.95) is stuffed with absolute worth-their-weight-in-platinum classics like the Eighth but it's mostly a pretty enjoyable read.

So don't be put off by the lead story, Robert Silverberg's "Beauty in the Night." Clearly just the opening part of a larger work, it's a low-key tale of alien domination, set in England, with the focus on the human relationships of the conquered. Smoothly readable but neither riveting nor memorable and lacking the energy and the spark that the bulk of the stories in this volume possess, it's an odd choice to kick off the collection.

Come to that, the hefty closing story, "A Cold Dry Cradle" by Gregory Benford and Elizabeth Malatrez, is a bit of a plod. Although the evocation of Mars is convincing, and the story – stranded expedition, dawn of a new era for life etc – is worthy enough, it all seems rather routine.

But there's a lot here to enjoy, especially if you've a fondness for Brit or Aussie writers, since this anthology's got more than the usual percentages of both, and there are lots of names familiar to readers of this magazine who show they can do the business. There are two futuristic spy stories, surprisingly similar in structure if very different in detail, from two *Interzone* stalwarts: Alastair Reynolds's "A Spy in Europa" and Paul McAuley's "Second Skin" are both high-tech off-Earth espionage, smoothly handled and both evoking complex, satisfyingly strange futures.

Then two Ian Mac-s are here with first-class offerings, MacDonald with "After Kerry," which takes its time to find its feet but is worth staying with, and MacLeod with "Nevermore," which, although it lacks the emotional focus of his strongest stories is still good, with his characteristic hallmarks, a sense of yearning and loss running through it. There's also an effective and affecting piece from Brian Stableford, "The Pipes of Pan," which depicts a child who was never meant to grow up. The fine "Winter Fire" by Geoffrey Landis is a very believable account of a future Bosnian-style nightmare seen through a child's eyes. And the ubiquitous Steve Baxter is on form with "Moon Six," a ripping good alternate-worlds yarn, as is Gwyneth

## Mafeking Relieved

Neil Jones &

Neil McIntosh

Jones with the very different "Balinese Dancer" which has a minimal plot, even less action, a world-slowly-coming-apart backdrop and a subtly-building sense of menace which all mesh to make the story work.

However, Peter F. Hamilton's smoothly written "Escape Route" is a formulaic piece of space opera about a mysterious alien artefact and rather tedious human bad-guys. And Simon Ings's "Open Veins," which boasts a dead character who went out searching for the ultimate high, starts promisingly but fizzles towards the end.

The phenomenal Greg Egan is represented by two stories, which serve to represent his virtues on the one hand and his weaknesses on the other. His talents are magnificently showcased in "Reasons to be Cheerful," surely his best short story since "Learning to Be Me," in which he wraps a sympathetic character in a remorselessly escalating nightmare, speculative science as only he can present it testing the human spirit to destruction. If you only have time or energy to read one story from this book, make it this the one. Selection number two, "Yeyuka," by contrast, points up his flaws. Although crammed with his trademark future-tech ideas, it's got an idiot plot. Spoiler warning: the hero wears a ring that protects him – and

could protect the shamefully exploited population of Africa – from disease. Going to Africa to do good, he walks around wearing it until the story's end when he finds himself faced with the uncomfortable choice Egan has artificially created for him: he can consent to let "bandits" chop off his finger so the ring can be put to work secretly for Africa, or say no and everyone will just let him pack and take the plane back to Australia – everything is down to his conscience. The only trouble is that in a non-idiot plot any number of people would have parted him and his ring/finger before we'd got halfway down page two. Greg, how *could* you?

James Patrick Kelly's nicely-turned "Itsy Bitsy Spider" gives us a sad way to revisit childhood, and "Steamship Soldier on the Information Front" by Nancy Kress is a convincing and unsettling snapshot of the near future. Then there's Bill Johnson's frankly off-the-wall but nevertheless captivating account of alien visitors getting mixed into deep dark family business in "We Will Drink a Fish Together."

Alan Brennert's "Echoes" is an effective piece about the turns people's lives could but don't take, and their destructive effect upon one very unusual individual. And, in the complex and excellent "Lethe," Walter Jon Williams turns in a hard-sf take on the same theme of other paths for one life to follow. Rising star David Masurek strikes gold again with "Getting to Know You," a downbeat witty story from his refreshingly original future history. G. David Nordley's "Crossing Chao Meng Fu" isn't in the same league but it is readable and convincing and all you'll ever want to know about mountaineering on Mercury.

On the mildly debit side, Michael Swanwick's "The Wisdom of Old Earth," wherein a posthuman returns to Earth, has a glaringly obvious message to impart. And "Frost Painting" by Carolyn Ives Gilman, about aliens, alienation and art, while pleasant, is also unexceptional enough to make us wonder what Dozois saw in it to rate its place in a best-of. Dozois regular Robert Reed's "Marrow" is his usual hefty far-future piece set on a vast world that is also a spaceship, only this time another world is discovered inside it: perhaps it's just us, but Reed's prose always seems to bulk four or five times longer than the story he has to tell and it's a slog to keep those pages turning.

Finally, some successful oddball stories. John Kessel's "Gulliver at Home" cleverly details the flipside of the Gulliver voyages to show us how it was for those who stayed at home, while the entertaining "The Masque of Agamemnon" by Sean Williams and Simon Brown stages Homer's *Iliad* in outer space. Our and Dozois's tastes coincide perfectly for once with



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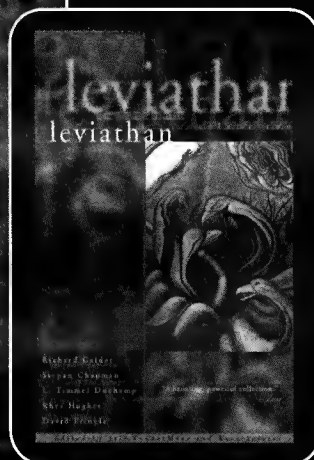
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"Heart of Whitenesse," latest from the Howard Waldrop stable of quirkily unclassifiable tales, in which Christopher Marlowe meets Doctor Faustus, which we tagged as one of the stars of the *New Worlds* anthology. And there's a story by William Sanders, whose earlier appearances in these Dozois volumes

with Amerindianesque sf folktales we have not enjoyed. But "The Undiscovered" is a gem. It's set in the North America of Elizabethan times and plays fast and loose with history to maroon an exceptional Englishman among the Native American Indians. It could easily have fallen flat but, like Waldrop, Sanders car-

ries his what-if history off with wit and élan.

Summing up, then: the stories mostly clock in as reliably engaging reads, and together send a signal of cautious optimism for future volumes. Perhaps Dozois is back on course at last.

Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh

## The Wonderful World of Coincidences (and Sam Cooke's Head in a Jar)

David Mathew

Some say coincidence can be attributed to one's heightened perception, one's level of expectation. If you're in a strange town, for example, and you're hungry for a specific dish, you turn the corner – and there is a restaurant that not only serves the desired food, but has an award for the same. Coincidence! Well, possibly. Or could it be that a deep part of your brain, before you turned that corner, acknowledged a giveaway smell, or sound, or somehow glimpsed a sign advertising the food in a bus window reflection, and in a split second prepared you for the news? Why else did you turn *that* corner?

On the morning I received my books to review, I finished Paul Auster's *The Red Notebook* (1995), the opening section of which is about coincidence. I was probably ready for any coincidence that life could throw at me. So the fact that the first two proofs – by Paul J. McAuley and Joan Slonczewski respectively – were from authors with knowledge of biology meant nothing. As did the fact that both *Ancients of Days: the Second Book of Confluence* and *The Children Star* are continuations of earlier work, and mention fictional histories that effect the course of the plot. The same facts could be said for many a novel...

A new tape was playing as I opened the post. Some songs had been included to fill up a side; and one was Sam Cooke's "Wonderful World." You know the one: "Don't know much about history. Don't know much biology..." Something chimed: this song was with me throughout the readings, blending nicely with the odd arhythms that leak from the prose. (Both books, furthermore, are *good*.) Wouldn't it be an astonishing coincidence, I thought, pushing my luck, if the main syllables of these authors' surnames meant something similar! Alas, the stressed syllable in "McAuley" pertains to "court" or "hall." And the nearest I

could find to "Slon" (in Polish) means "elephant." Not much of a comparison to stretch for there! The text was all I had to go on.

Although I hadn't read the first book of McAuley's *Confluence* series, I agreed to review the second on the basis that I had read none of his other novels either, and that it was high time I made a start... *Ancients of Days: The Second Book of Confluence* (Gollancz, £16.99) does not have a story-so-far at the beginning; the facts are sprinkled throughout. This method is fair enough, of course, but for the first three chapters I did not feel as though I knew where I was or what was going on. Things improved...

"Confluence" is a noun describing the joining of rivers or floods, and the principal character, Yama was discovered (as a baby) lying on top of a dead woman, on a river. Years later, in an atmosphere of inter-departmental quarrels, tensions and worse ("these old departments are utterly decadent, Yama, incurable except by the most radical surgery"), our hero spends his time investigating his bloodline – or trying to, at any rate; this guy receives more than his fair share of knocks. He gets chased by a hellhound, and by a villain called Prefect Corin, who has arranged an assassination plot; Yama is imprisoned. He is tested: he is forced to manipulate the fireflies that manoeuvre around the characters' heads. It becomes known that Yama is subject to fits. He gets out of Corin's trap, and having met his long-lost father, he learns about his past and his people's past. The stage is set and the microphone is working for the next instalment.

In terms of peripheral details, three things are worth mentioning. The first is that there is a brainy librarian called Kun Norbu who reminded me (because of his intelligence and his name) of Kim New-

man. This might well have been accidental, but considering the fact that *Ancients of Days* is dedicated to him, I doubt it. The second point is that McAuley's use of worn-down steps might well become as definitive a symbol for him as J. G. Ballard's drained swimming pools. And lastly: McAuley has a very clear eye for descriptions of jumble: "The room beyond was swagged in faded tapestries and bunched silks stained with dust. The wrack of ten thousand years lay everywhere in an indiscriminate jumble. Lapidary icons were heaped like beetles in a green plastic bowl; a cassone, its sides painted with exquisitely detailed scenes..." Such place-setting in *Ancients of Days* is excellent. Read *Child of the River* first, however.

In Joan Slonczewski's *The Children Star* (Tor, \$23.95), Brother Rod rescues children from various planets and takes them to where they might start a new population. ("I wonder sometimes if we're not half-crazy, trying to settle a frontier with starving babies," a colleague states.) There is an accident involving a tumble down a ravine; there is much talk of llamas (an underrated system of travelling, in my opinion) and lots of discussion about DNA. There are singing trees and many-breasted lifeforms; and (most helpfully) an appendix entitled "The Life-Forms of Prokaryon." Slonczewski's obvious interest in the schemes of life are here kept in easily manageable lists. Learn your whirrs from your brokenhearts, or this book will be confusing! It is hard sf, but surprisingly easy to get into.

Rod learns from a woman named Khral that microzooids are intelligent, to a certain extent, and might have a function. Newcomers to Prokaryon are obliged to receive a certain biological induction, which



the poison-loving microzooids can speed along. A different character states: "Don't you see? They can life-shape us in a single day - anyone. At no cost." But the presence of intelligent mini-creatures is not necessarily a good thing: "How many of them were inside him? Would they not think it right to take his own life, to save so many of theirs?... 'They're already in my brain. They talk.'"

The diversity of lifeforms is amazing; wonderfully done. And the characters have been coloured-in nicely. Though I'm by no means convinced that I learned anything about science (and I got the feeling that Joan Slonczewski was reaching for that much), this was no bad thing. *The Children Star* is entertaining; a very good read on a train.

In Bryan Cholfin's introduction to *The Best of Crank!* (Tor, \$23.95), he states - prophetically enough, as it turns out - that now might not "be the best time to try to introduce a new magazine of science fiction and fantasy into the world, particularly one which deliberately swims against the prevailing currents of the category." Rumour has it (and I hope it's wrong) that the magazine has gone the way of the Showaddywaddy beetle-crusher. But if the magazine really *has* folded, it was not because of a lack of interesting stories. Or of "names," for that matter. Consider this invitation list: Brian Aldiss, Lisa Tuttle, Gene Wolfe, Jonathan Lethem (three times!), Gwyneth Jones, Karen Joy Fowler, Ursula Le Guin, Michael Bishop, R. A. Lafferty, A. A. Attanasio... Very strong.

What Cholfin regards as the "prevailing currents" are described, the intention having been to pump back into the genre some work that was literate and sophisticated. On the strength of this book, he's succeeded. Personal favourites were Tuttle's "Food Man" and Lafferty's "I Don't Care Who Keeps the Cows." In the former, there is an examination of eating disorders, which (coincidentally) I read in the same week that I read a newspaper report about young women smoking in order to suppress the urge for food: in order to stay thin. The principal character disposes of her food, rather than eating it; and then creates an idiomatic rationale: "...she preferred sex to food; she could give up one if allowed to keep the other. And by promising herself sex, rewarding herself with explicit, graphic, sensual memories every time she said no to something to eat, she managed to continue starving herself back to desirability." This story is beautiful, nasty and sad.

Lafferty's tale is about improving the brain (in a curious sense, the story probably *does* so; at the very least it gets the reader thinking about the fashion for bodily modification that

seems so prevalent these days. We improve our bodies in a gym and our hair in a salon, but our brains? Rarely.) Not brain enhancement in the sense of giving up beer, or taking up bridge or crosswords: this is all about "steroid implants and injections" because, as the slogan reads, "It's smart to be smart." This leads to further developments. "It was quite easy... to put any and all information into a shape-module form that was ready for impressing... a person with a brain sufficiently fortified with steroids might absorb the entire corpus of a hundred thousand novels in one impressing session, and he would possess this information and emotion and experience intimately forever." There are several groups of brain-injected people - the Scar-Tissue Clan, the Necklaces Clan and the Little Red Wagon People - and each has a voice...

Lethem's best story (in my opinion) concerns puppetry; and Le Guin's contribution concerns men who play games by day and go alleycatting by night. (No, chaps, there's a catch. Read on.) And the bad points are not actually *bad*; they're simply not to my taste (the plague of typos might have been swatted away by the time this volume reaches the shops). The introduction to the Attanasio story, in particular, seems out of place: "A. A. Attanasio is the mystic poet of science. Mixing strong magics, the moral dimensions of reality and quantum mechanics produces a strange, smoking brew guaranteed to

open the third eye." Come again, chief? This (enjoyable) story is about a boy inheriting sorcerer status (and then some!) - to become "The Dark One" of the title. But what happens when the Dark One falls in love? To mention "Santacide" by Eliot Fintushel, now, in a negative way might seem cheap, but I do so to emphasize the high ratio of good work to bad in this volume. This story was not enjoyed ("when there was still some percentage in the law maven trade, before the slime... sucked my dogs to the kneecaps"), but no collection is *perfect*...

Oh, and just in case you're "wondering why the magazine is named *Crank!*" Cholfin writes, "well, now you know. I am the crank, goo goo ga joob."

As long as we're clear on that.

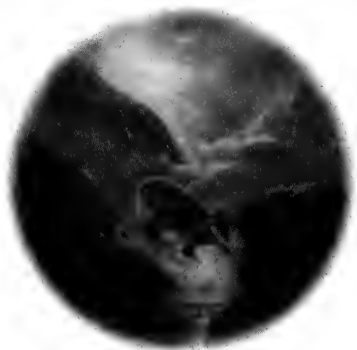
Breaking away from sf, and the printed word for that matter, we have Ramsey Campbell's new cassette, *Twilight Tales from Merseyside* (produced by Angela Heslop). Four stories have been included - "Calling Card," "The Guide," "The Companion" and "Out of the Woods" - and it's a long cassette. Readers in England or Europe wishing to purchase this tape (and I recommend that you do) should contact Radio Merseyside at 55 Paradise Street, Liverpool L1 3BP. Expect to pay £6 (with a 50 pence discount for personal callers). Elsewhere, the tape can be obtained from Necronomicon Press, P.O. Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893, USA. For \$9.95 plus \$1.50 postage.

My personal favourite is the oldest story, "Calling Card." An old woman receives a Christmas card with a not-so-pleasant example of seasons' greetings inside. Why has this happened? A mentally insecure boy-next-door from the past might have something to do with it. "The Guide" sees a character named Kew go in search of a church that has been mentioned in a guidebook by M. R. James. "The Companion" (as anyone who knows Campbell's work will have learned) is the one Stephen King particularly liked; it's the story of a man who visits fairgrounds around the country for his vacation. And "Out of the Woods" was dragged into the light by an editor on the look-out for stories on the subject of paper and Northern European legends, among other things.

Each story is carefully introduced, giving some sense of context. This cassette would be ideal for longish car journeys; but you will have to play each story several times. This is Campbell, don't forget: nothing is given to the listener easily, and some of the wordplay is teasing, but good fun.

David Mathew

## THE CHILDREN STAR



JOAN  
SLONCZEWSKI



# BOOKS RECEIVED



JULY  
1998

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and harrar titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Poul. **Starfarers**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86037-4, 383pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the publishers describe this big book, about a 120,000-year round voyage through space, as a "spellbinding new science fiction epic"; two chapters have previously appeared as short stories, one from this year but the other from as long ago as 1954.) *November 1998.*

Applegate, K. A. **The Secret**. "Animorphs, 9." Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-S90-19978-1, 156pp, B-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) *17th July 1998.*

Ashley, Mike, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Arthurian Legends**. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-533-7, x+S66pp, B-format paperback, cover by Julek Heller, £6.99. (Arthurian fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains reprint stories by Eleanor Arnason, Hilaire Belloc, Stephen Dedman, Roger Lancelyn Green, Phyllis Ann Karr, Arthur Machen, Theodore Goodridge-Roberts, John Steinbeck, Rosemary Sutcliffe, Jane Yolen and others, together with original stories by Fay Sampson, Peter Valentine Timlett, Ron Tiner and a couple of new writers; although a large part of it is newly assembled, this book conflates material from Ashley's first two Arthurian anthologies, *The Pendragon Chronicles* [1990] and *The Camelot Chronicles* [1992] – both of which are now out of print.) *13th August 1998.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Titan**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649811-6, 581pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1997; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 124.) *3rd August 1998.*

Benford, Gregory. **Artifact**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79195-1, 416pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985.) *July 1998.*

Benford, Gregory. **Jupiter Project**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79057-2, 195pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1975 [revised 1980]; this appears to have been Benford's attempt at a "Heinlein juvenile.") *August 1998.*

Bergstrom, Elaine. **The Door Through Washington Square**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00544-6, 360pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Stephens, \$6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; given its timeslip theme and its evocation of a certain place in the title, one might expect this to be some kind of tribute to Henry James [author of *Washington Square* and *The Sense of the Past*], but in fact it's about magician Aleister Crowley – the real-life inspiration for many horror novels, from Somerset Maugham's *The Magician* [1907] onwards; this is the first book of hers we recall seeing, but Bergstrom [born 1946] is a well-established writer, mainly of paperback-originals, who has also written novels [including at least two sequels-by-others, *Mina: The Dracula Story Continues* (1994) and *Madeleine: After the Fall of Usher* (1996)] under the name Marie Kiraly.) *1st August 1998.*

Bova, Ben. **Twice Seven: Stories**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79741-0, 290pp, A-format paperback, \$6.50. (Sf collection, first edition; the 14 stories all date since 1992, and originally appeared in *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Analog* and various other magazines and original anthologies; it comes as something of a surprise to discover that the veteran Bova – best known these days for overly-fat sf social melodramas, of the sort we have characterized before now as "The Carpetboppers in space" – has remained so active as a short-story writer; his stories seem a lot more sprightly than his novels.) *August 1998.*

Bradbury, Ray. **I Sing the Body Electric!** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-01789-6, 331pp, A-format paperback, cover by Trevor Scobie, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1969; this is a reprint of the slightly revised edition of 1977 which contains the poem "Christus Apollo.") *3rd August 1998.*

Bradbury, Ray. **Something Wicked This Way Comes**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-01790-X, 215pp, A-format paperback, cover by J. K. Potter, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1962; it seems Simon & Schuster/Earthlight are now set on reissuing most of Bradbury in UK paperback.) *3rd August 1998.*

Brin, David. **Heaven's Reach: The Final Book of the Second Uplift Trilogy**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-564-9, xii+S71pp, hardcover, cover by Fred Gambino, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) *No date shown; received in July 1998.*

Brin, David. **Infinity's Shore: Book Two of the Second Uplift Trilogy**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-S6S-7, xiii+670pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 117.) *August 1998.*

Cadigan, Pat. **Tea From an Empty Cup**. Voyager, ISBN 0-S86-21842-4, 218pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition;

we listed the American [Tor Books] hardcover edition as the "first" last month, but it seems this British paperback-original edition precedes; Cadigan's first new novel in half a decade, it seems to be in her usual cyberpunk mode.) *7th September 1998.*

Card, Orson Scott, ed. **Future on Ice**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86694-1, 432pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; a belated companion volume to an earlier Card-edited anthology, *Future on Fire* [1990], it contains reprint stories, many of them well-known and all dating from the 1980s, by Isaac Asimov, Greg Bear, Gregory Benford, Octavia Butler, C. J. Cherryh, John Crowley, Karen Joy Fowler, Lisa Goldstein, John Kessel, Nancy Kress, George R. R. Martin, John Varley, David Zindell and others; there is a long and interesting introduction by Card on the subject of religion and sf.) *November 1998.*

Coe, David B. **The Outlanders: Book II of The LonTobyn Chronicle**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86447-7, 409pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; Big Commercial Fantasy, praised by David Drake, Anne McCaffrey and others.) *October 1998.*

Conway, David. **Metal Sushi**. Introduction by Grant Morrison. Oneiros Books [8 Short St., Mount Pleasant, Swansea SA1 6YG], ISBN 1-902197-00-3, vi+201pp, trade paperback, cover by John Coulthart, £7.95. (Sf/horror collection, first edition; the author, whose debut book this probably is, is British and has contributed to the small press; it is also the debut book of this new small-press publishing house, who promise future works by Mike Butterworth, Alan Moore, Grant Morrison and others.) *Late entry: June (?) publication, logged in July 1998.*

David, John. **Enemies of Society**. Book Guild [25 High St., Lewes, E. Sussex BN7 2LU], ISBN 1-85776-273-8, 534pp, hardcover, £15.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the author, probably pseudonymous, is British, and this is his debut novel; according to the accompanying publicity letter, though not mentioned on the book itself, it is "the first volume in the new epic Doomed Galaxy trilogy.") *Late entry: 25th June publication, lagged in July 1998.*

Davidson, Avram. **The Avram Davidson Treasury: A Tribute Collection**. Edited by Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis. Afterwords by Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86729-8, 447pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; this is much like the Robert Bloch *festschrift* which Tor published a year or two ago: a generous selection of stories by the eminent deceased author, each introduced by a "celebrity"; contributors include Poul and Karen Anderson, Peter S. Beagle, Gregory Benford, Algis Budrys, John Clute, Guy Davenport, Thomas M. Disch, Gardner Dozois, Alan Dean Foster, William Gibson, James Gunn, Damon Knight, Ursula Le Guin, Frederik Pohl, Lucius Shepard, Michael Swanwick, Kate Wilhelm and Gene Wolfe; there are 37 quirky Davidson stories in this big book, including such well-known pieces as "Or All the Sea with Oysters" and "The Sources of the Nile"; recommended.) *October 1998.*

Delany, Samuel R. **The Fly at Ciron**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649939-2, 222pp, A-format



paperback, cover by Thomas Canty, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993; this is the first UK edition; it's described by Ursula Le Guin as "vintage Delany in his finest fantasy mode"; a much shorter version first appeared as a collaboration with James Sallis in *The Magozine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 1971; for this expansion Delany has removed Sallis's contributions, although he still acknowledges the latter's help.) 17th August 1998.

Dickson, Gordon R. **The Dragon in Lyonesse**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86159-1, 381pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; latest in the "Dragon Knight" series of light fantasies, this one has Arthurian elements.) October 1998.

Dietz, William C. **Steelheart**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00452-X, 324pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; latter-day pulp spacefaring adventure about an android hero; Dietz, who has now written 14 novels for Ace, began with the six-volume "Sam McCade, Interstellar Bounty Hunter" series; it's not clear whether this one is part of another series.) 1st August 1998.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Good Old Stuff**. "Adventure SF in the Grand Tradition." 5t Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-19275-4, xxiii+434pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains reprint stories, chronologically arranged from 1948 to 1971, by A. E. Van Vogt, James H. Schmitz, L. Sprague de Camp, Jack Vance, C. M. Kornbluth, Leigh Brackett, Murray Leinster, Poul Anderson, Gordon R. Dickson, Cordwainer Smith, Brian Aldiss, H. Beam Piper, Ursula Le Guin, Fritz Leiber, Roger Zelazny and James Tiptree, Jr — most of which are sophisticated examples of the space opera or planetary romance; Dozois's solid introduction and notes add up to an argument for the romance [i.e. adventure] element in popular sf, and they contain trailers for a forthcoming second volume, *The Good New Stuff*, which will cover the years since the early 1970s; recommended.) November 1998.

Dozois, Gardner, and Sheila Williams, eds. **Isaac Asimov's Detectives**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00545-4, 243pp, A-format paperback, cover by Andy Lackow, \$5.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; six stories on whodunnit themes culled from *Asimov's SF Magazine*, 1978-1995; the authors are Isaac Asimov, Greg Egan, Lisa Goldstein, Nancy Kress, John Varley and Kate Wilhelm.) 1st August 1998.

Duncan, Dave. **Future Indefinite: Round Three of the Great Game**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14501-7, 523pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; the reviewer in *SFX* magazine described the first volume of this trilogy as "the best fantasy novel of the decade.") 10th September 1998.

Duncan, Dave. **The Gilded Chain: A Tale of the King's Blades**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97460-6, 338pp, hardcover, £23. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) November 1998.

Dunn, J. R. **Full Tide of Night**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97434-7, 312pp, hardcover, cover by Liz Kenyon, \$14. (Sf novel, first edition; by the author best known for his well-reviewed last novel, *Days of Cain*, this is one of Avon's reasonably-priced "pocket" hardcovers; it's John Webster's revenge tragedy

*The Duchess of Molfi* re-imagined in outer space.) 8th July 1998.

Ford, Jeffrey. **The Physiognomy**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79332-6, 244pp, A-format paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; we didn't see the first edition, but this is apparently a serious sf novel by a newish American writer [born 1955] who should not be confused with "Jeffrey Lord" — an old Lyle Kenyon Engel house name which appeared on scuds of paperback-original fantasy novels in the past [mostly written by Roland J. Green].) August 1998.



Foy, George. **Contraband**. "The dazzling new cyberthriller." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50629-3, 518pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) Late entry: 7th May publication, received in July 1998.

Gemmell, David A. **Echoes of the Great Song**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14255-7, 446pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1997.) 10th September 1998.

Godwin, Parke. **Lord of Sunset**. Avon, ISBN 0-380-72675-0, 466pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jeff Barson, \$13. (Historical novel, first edition; American author Godwin has been chewing his way steadily through British history and legendry for the past 20-odd years: following an Arthurian trilogy, a couple of Robin Hood novels and a retelling of *Beowulf*, he now tackles King Harold, 1066 and all that; there appears to be little or no fantasy content.) July 1998.

Hamilton, Peter F. **A Second Chance at Eden**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-74125-0, xi+431pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; it contains the title novella, new to this book, the novella "Escape Route," first published in *Interzone* last year, and five short stories, a couple of which first appeared in David Garnett's *New Worlds* anthologies; all are set in the same universe as Hamilton's ongoing "Night's Dawn" trilogy of novels.) 9th October 1998.

Harpman, Jacqueline. **I Who Have Never Known Men**. Translated by Ros Schwartz. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-73181-9, 206pp, A-format paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first published in France, 1995; this English translation first published in 1997 by Seven Stories Press;

here we have an example of what has become a rare phenomenon, an sf novel translated from a foreign language [it does not appear to have been published as sf in the first instance, but is presented as such here]; the author was born in Belgium in 1929 and has been a published writer since 1958, although this is her first novel to appear in English; it's set in the future, the theme is feminist, and reviewers have compared it to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and to "Kafka with a dash of Ursula Le Guin.") July 1998.

Hayden, Patrick Nielsen, ed. **Starlight 2**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86184-2, 318pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; all-new stories by Ted Chiang, Esther M. Friesner, Angelica Gorodischer [translated from the Spanish by Ursula Le Guin], Ellen Kushner, Geoffrey A. Landis, David Langford, Jonathan Lethem, Carter Scholz, Martha Soukup, Robert Charles Wilson and others; the first volume of the series [1996] got rave reviews, and this follow-up looks to be good.) November 1998.

Heller, Carol. **The Sands of Kalaven: A Novel of Shunlar**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79080-7, 276pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this seems to be a second novel by a new American writer whose first was called *The Gotes of Vensunor*.) July 1998.

Hoh, Diane. **Truth or Die**. "Nightmare Hall." Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-11166-3, 163pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; this one is copyrighted to someone called Nola Thacker, which suggests that "Diane Hoh" is a house name — or has become one.) 17th July 1998.

Irwin, Robert. **The Arabian Nightmare**. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-73-9, 266pp, B-format paperback, cover by Henri Regnault, £6.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first published in 1983; this is the third Dedalus printing [and in-between-times it was also a Viking hardcover and a Penguin paperback]; they are now pushing it as "a masterpiece... one of the great works of 20th century fiction.") 14th July 1998.

Jones, Stephen, and David Sutton, eds. **Dark Terrors 4: The Gollancz Book of Horror**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06581-1, 349pp, hardcover, cover by Les Edwards, £16.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains new stories by Stephen Baxter, Ramsey Campbell, Dennis Etchison, Christopher Fowler, Neil Gaiman, Terry Lamsley, Joel Lane, Richard Christian Matheson, Geoff Nicholson, Jay Russell, David J. Schow, Michael Marshall Smith, Thomas Tessier, Lisa Tuttle and others, plus a reprints of a recent story by Poppy Z. Brite.) 22nd October 1998.

Kasker, Jay. **Out of the Light**. Minerva Press [195 Knightsbridge, London SW7 1RE], ISBN 1-86106-868-9, 438pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British writer, it seems to be sub-Anne Rice vampire stuff.) Na date shown: received in July 1998.

La Plante, Richard. **Mind Kill**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-86055-2, 318pp, hardcover, cover by Robert Santora, \$23.95. (Psychic horror thriller, first edition [?]; La Plante used to live in Britain [with his more famous wife, the TV writer Lynda] but it seems he







has returned to the States and his books are originating over there now; whether or not this one has appeared in the UK we don't know.) 9th July 1998.

Lorraine, Lilith. **Ape Into Pleiades.**

Edited by Steve Sneyd. Hilltop Press [4 Nowell Place, Almondbury, Huddersfield, W. Yorks. HDS 8PB], ISBN 0-90S262-17-4, 20pp, paperback, cover by Stuart Raymond Scouler, £2.75. (Sf poetry collection, first edition; limited to 150 copies; this slim pamphlet contains ten poems together with a biographical profile of the author and a short bibliography; Lilith Lorraine was born Mary Maude Dunn in Texas, 1894, and died in 1967; she became a contributor of stories to Hugo Gernsback's sf pulps in the late 1920s, and later of poems to minor pulps like *Stirring Science Stories* in the 1940s; she is now regarded as "America's first woman poet of science fiction.") No date shown: received in July 1998.

Lovegrove, J. M. H. **The Krilov Continuum: The Guardians, Book 1.** "Sci-Fi Channel." Millennium, ISBN 1-8S798-S36-2, 344pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; first of a paperback-original series which seems designed to cash in on the X-Files brand of conspiracy-flavoured horror-sf; the author is better known as James Lovegrove, and presumably he uses his initials here to distinguish this from more serious work; so far as we know, this is the first work of fiction to be published under the "Sci-Fi Channel" imprimatur, their earlier books released by Orion/Millennium having been non-fiction of the UFO and strange-phenomena type.) 6th July 1998.

Lustbader, Eric. **Dark Homecoming.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-6499S3-8, 482pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/suspense thriller, first published in the USA, 1997; it's not clear to us whether this one contains any sf/fantasy elements, but it seems to involve organ-transplantation – and it has, after all, been sent to us for review; the author, who used to be known as Eric Van Lustbader, has written fantasy novels in the past.) 3rd August 1998.

Mason, Lisa. **Cyberweb.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79917-0, 262pp, trade paperback, \$12. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; it appears to be a sequel to her earlier cyberpunk novel *Arachne*.) July 1998.

Pierce, Tamora. **Lioness Rampant: Song of the Lioness, 4.** Scholastic/Point, ISBN 0-S90-198S9-9, 308pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; Point have also sent us simultaneous reprints of the first three novels in the series, *Alanna: The First Adventure* [1983], *In the Hand of the Goddess* [1984] and *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* [1986], all priced at £3.99 each.) 17th July 1998.

Priest, Christopher. **The Extremes.** Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-684-81632-6, 393pp, hardcover, cover by Holly Warburton, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; Priest's first new novel since his multi-award-winning *The Prestige* looks to be another of his complex reality-benders, in this case concerning psychotic mass-killers and virtual-reality machines.) 20th August 1998.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Icehenge.** Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-86609-7, 287pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1984; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 16.) 12th July 1998.

Rosenberg, Joel. **The Silver Stone: Keepers of the Hidden Ways, Book 2.**

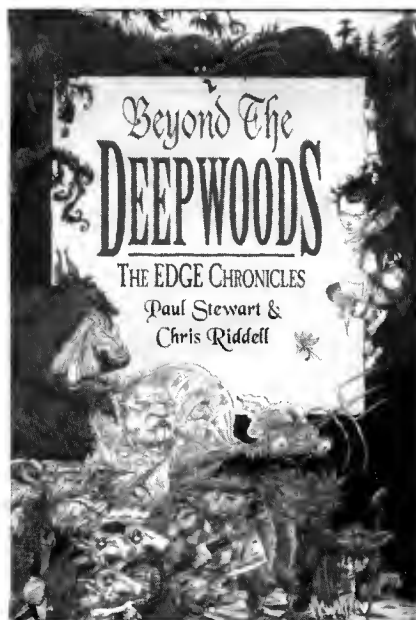
Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-72208-9, 326pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; follow-up to *The Fire Duke*.) July 1998.

Spencer, William Browning. **Irrational Fears.**

White Wolf/Borealis, ISBN 1-S6S04-91S-2, no pagination, hardcover, cover by Larry Perlman, \$19.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; it looks as though it may contain an element of black humour; this is the first White Wolf proof we have ever been sent: their address is 73S Park North Blvd., Suite 128, Atlanta, Georgia 30021, USA.) August 1998.

Stableford, Brian. **Chimera's Cradle.** "The Third Book of Genesys." Orbit, ISBN 1-8S723-636-X, S08pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Salwowski, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1997; follow-up to *Solamander's Fire* and *Serpent's Blood*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 122; in a brief "Author's Note" Stableford describes this completed trilogy as an "eccentric planetary romance" which owes some of its inspiration to the Roman writer Pliny the Elder.) 6th August 1998.

Stewart, Paul, and Chris Riddell. **Beyond the Deepwoods: The Edge Chronicles.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40967-2, 282pp, hardcover, cover by Riddell, £10.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; Stewart is an established British writer of children's books, and Riddell is known as an illustrator and cartoonist; the novel is attractively illustrated throughout with line-drawings by the latter.) October 1998.



Stewart, Sean. **Mockingbird.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00S47-0, 278pp, hardcover, cover by Maggie Taylor, \$21.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the cover carries words of praise for the author from Karen Joy Fowler, William Gibson, Ursula Le Guin and Neal Stephenson; gosh, he must be doing something right.) August 1998.

Sullivan, Tricia. **Dreaming in Smoke.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-8S798-S39-7, 290pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; according to the copyright page, there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] – however, this is not confirmed

by the accompanying publicity sheet, so possibly the hardcover was cancelled; Sullivan's third novel, following *Lethe* and *Someone to Watch Over Me*.) 6th July 1998.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **Tales from the Perilous Realm.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10343-1, 178pp, B-format paperback, cover by Sarah Gibb, £5.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in 1997; this is a bringing-together of the four shorter tales originally published in various slim volumes during Tolkien's lifetime: "Farmer Giles of Ham" [1949], "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" [1961], "Leaf by Niggle" [1964] and "Smith of Wootton Major" [1967].) 3rd August 1998.

White, James. **Mind Changer: A Sector General Novel.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86663-1, 303pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; latest in this 36-year-old doctors-in-space series by a British writer loved by American readers but much underrated in his home country; the books would make a good basis for a TV series – a sort of cross between *E.R.* and *Star Trek*.) October 1998.

White, Michael. **Life Out There: The Truth of and Search for Extraterrestrial Life.** Little Brown, ISBN 0-316-64S14-1, xi+210pp, hardcover, \$16.99.

(Popular-science text, first edition; the author is best known for his competent biographies of Darwin, Einstein, Galileo, Hawking and Newton [a couple of them collaborations with John Gribbin], although he earned a bad mark within the sf world a few years ago with his quickie biography of Isaac Asimov; this new volume looks to be a sensible antidote to all the UFO books that clutter the shelves; we say that despite the offensive first sentence of the blurb: "Until a few years ago, any talk of alien life was considered cranky, weird, the preserve of science-fiction enthusiasts and anoraks" – which is an insult to Carl Sagan and many scientists as well as to sf writers and readers.) 2nd July 1998.

Willis, Connie, and Cynthia Felice. **Promised Land.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00S43-8, 362pp, A-format paperback, cover by David R. Darrow, \$6.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; a belated follow-up to two earlier collaborations by the same authors, *Light Raid* and *Water Witch*, it's a planetary romance "set on the plains of a distant world, and in the confines of the human heart.") 1st August 1998.

Yolen, Jane. **The One-Armed Queen.** "With Music of the Dales by Adam Stemple." Tor, ISBN 0-312-8S243-6, 332pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; by "America's favorite storyteller," this is a belated sequel to her earlier adult novels *Sister Light*, *Sister Dark* and *White Jenna*; the composer Adam Stemple, whose songs are included in an appendix, is the author's son.) November 1998.

Zelazny, Roger, and Jane Lindskold. **Donnerjack.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-77022-9, S79pp, A-format paperback, cover by Amy Halperin, \$6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; Zelazny's last novel, completed by his partner of his final years, fantasy writer Lindskold; it's a big book, over S00 pages of smallish print, which makes it considerably longer than any novel Zelazny published in his lifetime; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 126.) August 1998.



Allston, Aaron. **Iron Fist: X-Wing, Book Six.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50600-5, 310pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) 9th July 1998.

Archer, Nathan. **Cold War.** "Predator." Millennium, ISBN 1-75281-653-5, 266pp, A-format paperback, cover by Dimitri Patelis, £4.99. (Sf film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; it's based on a Dark Horse Comics graphic novel by Mark Verheiden, which was inspired by the 20th Century Fox Predator movies.) Late entry: 8th June publication, received in July 1998.

Brite, Poppy Z. **The Lazarus Heart.** "The Crow." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648365-8, 213pp, A-format paperback, cover by Cliff Nielson, £5.99. (Horror movie-and-comic-book spinoff novel, first published in the USA [?], 1998; it's "inspired by the series created by James O'Barr" and is copyrighted "Edward R. Pressman Film Corporation"; it appears to be the second in a series of which other titles are by David Bischoff and Chet Williamson.) 3rd August 1998.

Bulis, Christopher. **Vanderdecken's Children.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40590-2, 281pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; "featuring the Eighth Doctor and Sam.") 3rd August 1998.

Clark, Catherine. **Lost in Space.** Hippo, 0-590-11273-2, 121pp, B-format paperback, £3.99. (Sf movie juvenile novelization, first published in the USA [?], 1998; it's "based on a screenplay written by Akiva Goldsman," which in turn was inspired by a 1960s TV series.) 17th July 1998.

Glut, Donald F. **Dinosaur Valley Girls: The Book.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0466-3, 259pp, large-format paperback, \$35. (Illustrated "making-of-the film" book, including the complete script of the low-budget sf/fantasy movie in question; first edition; this is a rather silly item for McFarland to be publishing: on the back cover director Mick Garris is quoted as describing the film [not his, but Don Glut's] as "a masterpiece of arrested development that will seek out the 12-year-old boy hiding in you and tickle him to death.") July 1998.

## Spinoffery

*This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shored worlds and shorecrops (including non-fiction about shored worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.*



Kaufman, Lloyd, and James Gunn. **All I Need to Know About Filmmaking I Learned from The Toxic Avenger.** "The Shocking True Story of Troma Studios." Introduction by Roger Corman. Boulevard, ISBN 0-425-16357-1, xv+336pp, trade paperback, \$14. (Autobiography-cum-studio history by a maker of low-budget sf/horror movies; first edition; presumably sf novelist Gunn actually did the writing, with producer Kaufman talking into a microphone; Kaufman and Troma are responsible for over 300 films since 1974.) 1st August 1998.

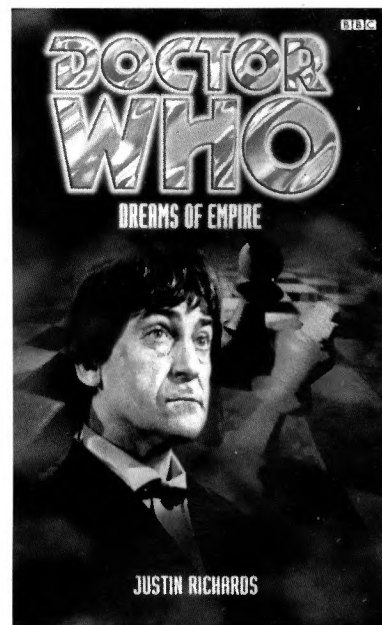
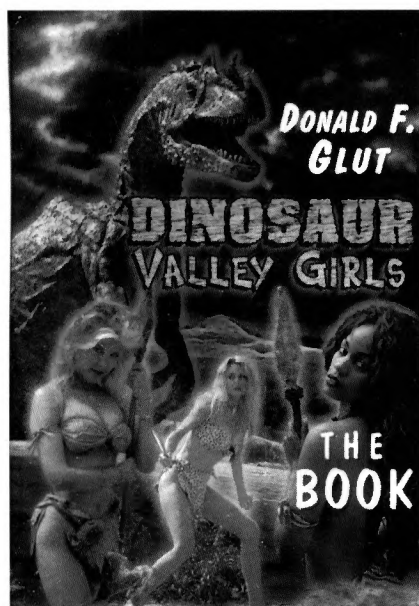
Lucanio, Patrick, and Gary Coville. **American Science Fiction Television Series of the 1950s: Episode Guides and Casts and Credits for Twenty Shows.** McFarland [distributed in Britain by Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-7864-0434-5, 252pp, hardcover, \$48.50 [£43.65 UK]. (Illustrated guide to U.S. sf TV series during the decade in question; first edition; "apart from *The Twilight Zone*, which retains a following," you may be tempted to ask, "what American sf TV series of the 1950s? — were there any?"; this book provides the answers, with as much exhaustive information as you could wish about long-forgotten, low-budget shows such as *Tom Corbett*, *Space Cadet* and *Captain Video* and *His Video Rangers*; the best of them seem to have been the anthology series *Tales of Tomorrow* and *Science Fiction Theatre*, which dramatized stories by well-known sf writers; oddly enough, *The Twilight Zone*, which began in 1959, is not described here: presumably it will be dealt with in a future volume covering the 1960s.) September 1998; released in the UK on 22nd October 1998.

Pratchett, Terry. **Wyrd Sisters: The Illustrated Screenplay.** "Terry Pratchett's Discworld." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14575-0, 128pp, large-format paperback, £9.99. (Illustrated TV-serial script, based on the 1988 humorous fantasy novel by Pratchett; first edition; the script is for one of two animated serials produced last year by Channel Four Television/Cosgrove Hall Films; as with the previously published screenplay [*Soul Music*, 1997], it's not immediately clear who wrote this script — they don't write themselves, even if some film-makers and publishers would like us to think so — but it's probably by Martin Jameson, whose name is given in tiny print on the back cover as "adapter" of the TV version; nor is it clear who the illustrations are by — not a single artist is named, but presumably the pictures are a Cosgrove Hall team-effort under the guidance of producer and director Jean Flynn.) 13th August 1998.

Renzi, Thomas C. **Jules Verne on Film: A Filmography of the Cinematic Adaptations of His Works, 1902 through 1997.** McFarland [distributed in Britain by Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-7864-0450-7, xiv+230pp, hardcover, £49.50. (Illustrated listing, with credits, of all movies — mainly sf — based on the novels of Jules Verne; first published in the USA, 1998; this is the American edition with a British price added; it's an extremely detailed and useful study, which covers not only the obvious adaptations but many of the cinema's unacknowledged borrowings from Verne; recommended to all those with a particular interest in the French master and/or in sf cinema generally.) 22nd October 1998.

Richards, Justin. **Dreams of Empire.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40598-8, 282pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; "featuring the Second Doctor, Jamie and Victoria.") 3rd August 1998.

Zahn, Timothy. **Specter of the Past.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50417-7, 386pp, A-format paperback, cover by Drew Struzan, £5.99. (Sf movie-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) 10th September 1998.





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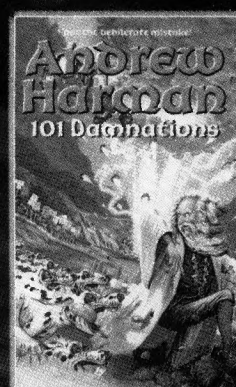
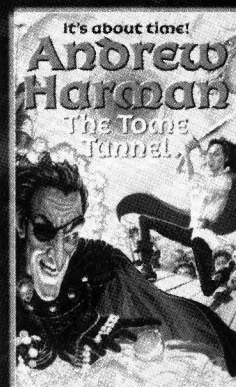
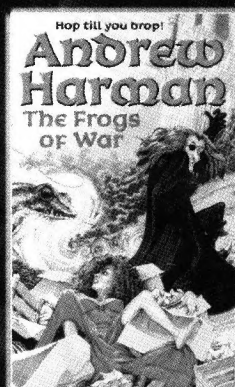
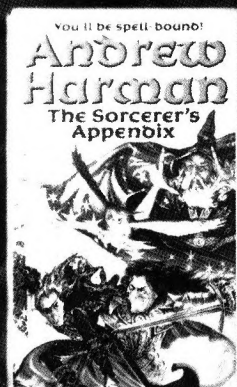
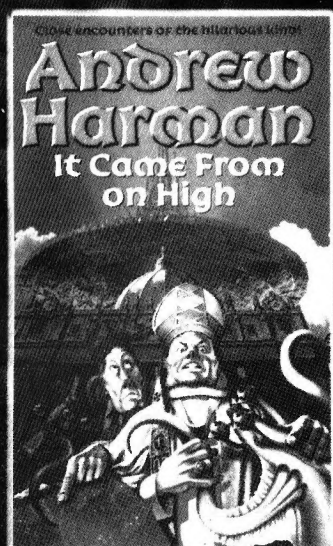
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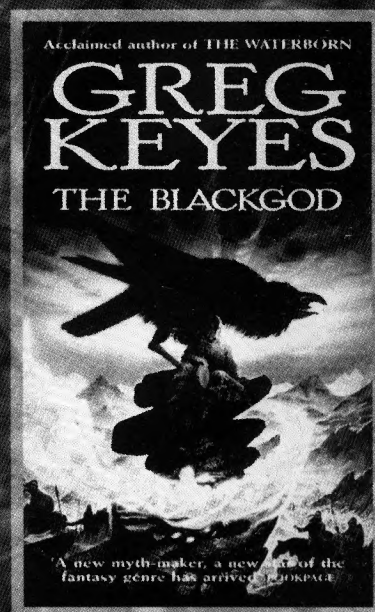
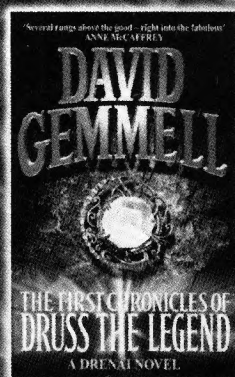
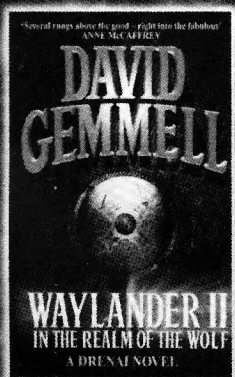
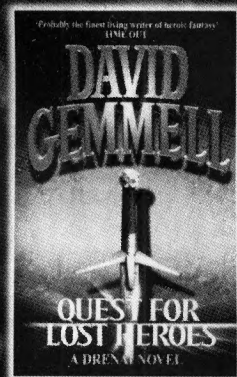
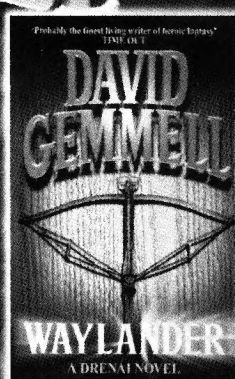
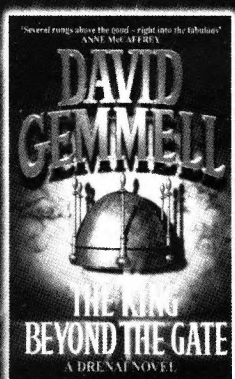
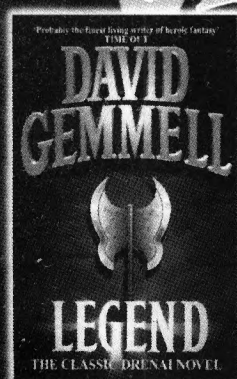
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